



Barlows' Cunning Little Vixen

An Evaluation of
The European Opera Centre's
First Educational Project

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This evaluation was funded by Edge Hill University. I would like to thank all those who took part in the study for giving their time and support so generously. In particular, I would like to thank pupils and staff at Barlows Primary School and the European Opera Centre's staff and facilitators, all of whom have been a delight to work with. I am also very grateful to Dr Mark Hall who has provided constant support to the project, from helping to secure funding to commenting on the final draft.

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Executive Summary

“They got these fantastic costumes together. They wrote these songs. They’d learnt these songs. They’d learnt these words. They learnt all the stage management. All the different aspects. These children” (Parent reflecting on the European Opera Centre’s project at Barlows Primary School).

“I think that was great because it wasn't just about the learning, it was about them themselves growing. It wasn't about understanding the show, it was understanding the characters and about themselves and what sort of things they can do” (Year Five teacher, Barlows Primary School).

“It was just like living in heaven for a week, for me” (Year Five pupil, Barlows Primary School).

In March 2017 the European Opera Centre carried out its pilot educational project at Barlows Primary School in Fazakerley, North Liverpool, with its 61 Year Five pupils. The school collapsed the timetable for the week enabling a whole five days to be devoted to the project. The European Opera Centre provided eight project facilitators to work with the children on

four discipline areas: Art and Design; Drama and Movement; Music (Composition and Performance); and Production. During the first two days of the week, children attended workshops on each of these disciplines. They were then able to choose which discipline to focus on for the rest of the week whilst developing a short opera. This was performed on the Friday to the school, families and visitors.

The project was based on the world’s first hour-long animated opera: a cartoon film of Janáček’s *The Cunning Little Vixen* commissioned by BBC Television and co-produced with Opus Arte and Los Angeles Opera in co-operation with the European Opera Centre. The story reflects the cycle of life, the passing of seasons, death and rebirth. It is populated with a cast of animals and insects: in addition to the vixen and her cubs are chickens and a badger, a frog, grasshopper and mosquito. The Year Five teachers introduced the children to the film and delivered lessons based on the opera.

When the European Opera Centre arrived at the school, the children were well versed in the opera and ready to work on their own version and to take the story ‘to a new level’ (Year 5 Teacher).

Methodology

The European Opera Centre required this evaluation to describe the success or otherwise of the *methods* of working; process was of as much import as outcomes. It needed to enable the Centre to review strengths and weaknesses of the project and to contribute to plans to develop it further and roll it out to more schools. The evaluation is also aimed at a wider audience: to inform readers of the content of the project, how it worked in the specific context of Barlows Primary School and how it might work in other settings.

The evaluation methodology was thus designed to qualitatively explore the experiences of those involved in the project, the meanings they derived from it and the learning they attributed to having gained from it. A number of complementary methods were employed to capture this diversity of perspectives: ethnographic observations, focus groups with the children using photo elicitation techniques and open-ended questions, focus groups with parents and stakeholder interviews. A plurality of voices is heard in the findings.

Findings:

- The project was a collaborative endeavour that drew on the European Opera Centre's extensive experience of bringing people together to work on creative projects. Collaborative working was highly successful in the project at Barlows because all involved were prepared to listen to one another and work flexibly. The collaboration included arts professionals, educational professionals (teaching staff and senior leaders) and children. Hierarchies were removed so no one group took the lead.
 - The child-led process meant that children had control of the project and this was considered vital to the project's success. The school's staff and the project's facilitators embraced this philosophy and children were enabled to lead on all aspects of the project, from creating a story, songs and musical motifs to designing costumes, undertaking risk assessments, designing marketing materials and greeting guests.
- “You were your own boss” (Year Five pupil).

“I thought, prior to coming to the performance, that basically they would be given a script, they would be given the costumes, they would be directed, but all of that responsibility was put onto the children themselves, which I thought was fantastic” (Senior School Improvement Officer).

- Children enjoyed the process from start to finish. This was regarded as important in a number of ways. It meant that children were excited to come into school each day. It also meant that they had a positive introduction to opera and to a variety of creative disciplines. The children were able to take a sense of pride in the work they produced and showcase their work to their families and the rest of the school. As well as enjoying the moment, it is possible that seeds of creative possibility have been sown in the children. A number of them talked about the creative careers they would now like to develop.

“Some children were coming up to me and saying, ‘Miss, I got up at 7:00 this morning, because I couldn't wait to come in.’ They knew where they'd left a scene. If they were in the production team, they knew where they were up to. They came straight in that day, and

they knew where they were up to. They were just really hands on, and they got the job done, at the end of the day” (Year Five Teacher).

- *The Cunning Little Vixen* film proved an ideal vehicle for engaging children and introducing them to opera. The children loved the humour of the film – in particular the comical chickens - and were able to understand the motivations of the animal characters. They went on to develop the story for their own production and to write songs and create musical motifs for the characters.

“[My daughter] was a chicken, when she was ... in Drama. I remember one morning – I think it was the Thursday morning – we came out of the house, and she walked to the car, acting like a chicken, and making chicken noises. Then, on the Friday, after the production had finished, we were at home, and she'd gone to bed. I woke up in the middle of the night, and I heard chicken noises coming from her bedroom. She was being a chicken in her sleep. I just couldn't believe it, but do you know what? I laughed so much. It was so funny” (Parent and Teaching Assistant).

- The project was genuinely inclusive. A number of the Year 5 children had special educational needs but this posed no problem at all. All children were catered for and all were acknowledged at the end of the project with applause and certificates.

“All these kids are included. All these kids are involved. Their ideas are valued” (Higher Level Teaching Assistant).

- The project opened up channels of communication between some of the children and their parents as children excitedly reported back on what they had been doing at school. In addition, parental involvement was incorporated into the project’s design. Parents and carers were invited to take part in after school workshops with their children, as well as being invited to the final performance of the opera. This involvement was understood as an important aspect of developing families’ ‘cultural capital’.


“You could see [the parents and carers] were made up seeing it. They said, ‘Oh they’ve really enjoyed it. And they keep talking about this ‘Cunning Little Vixen’” (Year 5 Teacher).

“When I stood up at the end, my Mum gave me a smiley face. Yes, she was just smiling at me” (Year 5 Pupil).

- The benefits to the children were wide ranging. The evaluation stresses the need to look beyond measurable outcomes and to embrace the less tangible benefits of creative projects. At Barlows some of the qualities and skills that children developed included self-confidence, empathy and team work.

- The project’s design worked well but there is a strong element of unpredictability inherent in it. Barlows was open to seeing what might materialise. A school's commitment is crucial for the success of the project and to increase the chances of the project being successful elsewhere, other schools would need to take the same dedicated yet open approach.

“Until you throw 60 children in there you don't know what's going to happen. It could be planned meticulously, but until those 60 children are there doing it....” (Higher Level Teaching Assistant).



Chapter 1

Prelude

This chapter provides some background to the European Opera Centre's first educational project that is the subject of this evaluation. It took place at Barlows Primary School in Fazakerley, North Liverpool, with its Year Five pupils in March 2017. The chapter provides an outline of the European Opera Centre's work and discusses the series of relationships that enabled the project.

The European Opera Centre was established in late 1997. It began life in Manchester but since 2004 has been based in Liverpool at the Creative Campus of Liverpool Hope University. Its twofold aim has remained consistent over the years:

- To help people of high potential move from education to employment in opera;
- To help develop audiences for opera.

The European Parliament and the European Commission were involved in the initial development of the Centre and provided consistent support for some twenty years. During this time, the Centre has worked with people from 37 European countries with the aim of helping to develop their careers. In 2015 the Centre's trustees made the decision to extend the opportunities on offer to the rest of the world and currently there are connections being forged with China and the USA as well as a host of other countries. The Centre's most recent auditions attracted people from 77 countries.

As well as having this international focus, the local area remains important to the European Opera Centre. To date the Centre has undertaken eight opera projects with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. The Centre's Chief Executive reflects on how, in his experience, Liverpool has an openness towards opera. This is not necessarily the case in other parts of the UK where, due to the country's limited history of opera, it tends to be seen as being an upper middle-class pursuit. He regards the city, with its flamboyant characters, many of whom have a propensity towards storytelling, as having an 'operatic' culture: 'In opera you wear your heart on your sleeve and there's an element of being larger than life. And I think many people in Liverpool have that quality'.

The European Opera Centre thrives on unusual projects. For instance, it performed the Hungarian stage premiere of Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* and subsequently toured the production from Riga to St Petersburg, the first people to do so since Britten himself. It also

enjoys taking opera to places that rarely, if ever, experience opera, and has given the first full opera performance in Chania, the second city of Crete. The Centre's Chief Executive reflects: 'I mean, it seemed just extraordinary, and it was very moving, because the entire town turned out, we were there for a week, to see our performances: it was a real community event.'

In terms of reaching new and varied audiences, though, the most ambitious of the Centre's projects has been to create the first hour-long animated opera: a cartoon film of Janáček's *The Cunning Little Vixen*. The idea came from Kent Nagano, the Centre's Honorary President, who envisaged it as an exciting vehicle to bring opera to people who would never otherwise experience it. Nagano recorded the orchestral track with the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, and Geoff Dunbar designed and directed the animation. Interestingly and fittingly, the opera itself first came into being in the 1920s after a series of Stanislav Lolek's comic strips based on the stories of a vixen were published in a Brno newspaper. These were subsequently turned into a novel by Rudolf Těsnohlídek, illustrated by Lolek, that heavily influenced Janáček's libretto.

The story reflects the cycle of life, the passing of seasons, death and rebirth. The titular vixen dies at the end of the opera but is survived by her litter of cubs. It is populated with a cast of animals and insects: in addition to the vixen and her cubs are a philosophical cockerel, comical chickens and a curmudgeonly old badger, a pesky mosquito and a hungry frog, and a woodpecker that assumes the role of a priest.

The project was taken up by BBC Television and it has since taken on a life of its own. Versions have been made in English, Spanish, Catalan, Czech and French (with the European Opera Centre selecting, training and recording the cast for each version) and it has been seen by an estimated 3 million people around the world. Live performances have taken place alongside screenings of the film, most recently in Limoges in southwest central France. The first live performance of the Czech version is due to take place in Prague in April 2018. The Centre envisages further possibilities for the animated opera: there is not currently a version in German, for instance, and, given that there is a big market for cine-concerts in Germany, it would be fitting to be able to screen *The Cunning Little Vixen* there together with a live orchestra. The other potential that the European Opera Centre has long seen for the animated opera is its use as an educational tool. The Chief Executive has received

feedback from young families that have watched the film in their homes, but up until now it has never been used in an educational setting.

The pilot educational project that is the subject of this evaluation report came about through a series of relationships. The Chief Executive of the European Opera Centre is also on the Board of the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group and through conversations with its Director of Learning and Participation, came up with ideas of how the project could potentially work. The Centre's position on the Liverpool Hope campus has facilitated relationships with academic staff at the university and they were able to recommend students and alumni to help deliver the project. In the same way they signposted the Centre to colleagues at Edge Hill University hence our involvement in the project evaluation.

The European Opera Centre also has links with one of Barlows Primary School's governors. Both she and the head teacher got to hear of these tentative ideas and were highly enthusiastic about helping to develop them. Barlows Primary School is in Fazakerley, a particularly socially and economically disadvantaged suburb of North Liverpool. The school's involvement has been important in the process of designing and conducting the Centre's first educational project. Year Five teachers have developed an innovative programme of work based on *The Cunning Little Vixen* film and they worked with a small group of Year Five children on staging and performing, partly in Spanish, a short scene from the story. This was performed in December 2016 at the project's launch event at Williams Liverpool BMW showroom. Williams Liverpool BMW are the overall sponsors of the European Opera Centre's educational programme; this first project received additional support from the PH Holt Foundation, Ernest Cook Trust, Granada Foundation, Hemby Charitable Trust, Ravensdale Trust and Rushwoth Trust.

The programme of work that the school devised acted both as a way of introducing the Centre's project to the children involved, and as a way of delivering the national curriculum in creative ways. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this evaluation to assess the effectiveness or quality of this work in any detail, the way it enhanced the Centre's week-long project *is* discussed in the evaluation findings. Similarly, the launch event is not part of the evaluation, yet the fact that it precipitated parental involvement through the enthusiasm parents and carers displayed for the project at the event is remarked upon.

The next chapter of the report, 'The Backdrop', aims to provide some context to the project by briefly looking at the current climate in the UK regarding arts education and some of the claims that are made for its importance. This is followed by the Methodology chapter which sets out the evaluation aims and objectives and explains the methodological approach that was selected to achieve these aims. The chapter moves on to describe each of the methods used in the evaluation project. The next four chapters are dedicated to the process of the European Opera Centre's first educational project and the evaluation findings. 'The Story' is a descriptive chapter, outlining the phases of the Centre's project. The trilogy of chapters, 'Collaborative Working', 'Children's Roles' and 'Processes and Outcomes' presents data collected through a series of focus groups and interviews with those involved in the project. The final chapter, 'Coda', revisits the project's aims and considers the extent to which they were achieved. It looks forward to the rolling out of the project to other schools and considers what might make this a successful enterprise.



Chapter 2

The Backdrop

The European Opera Centre's educational project takes place in a climate where there is much concern over children and young people's lack of equal access to music education (Henley, 2011; Hallam, 2015) and to the arts and culture more generally (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016; Warwick Commission, 2015). This chapter incorporates a brief overview of recent discussion of the importance of creativity and culture in education and why it should be available to all children. It draws predominantly on a range of recently published reports in this area. Most of these relate to the arts and culture in a general sense, but some focus specifically on music. It should be noted that the European Opera Centre's project was *not* solely about music. Rather, it aimed to give a much wider grounding in creative education.

There has recently been considerable emphasis on the importance of the creative arts in children's learning (see for example Winner, Goldstein and Vincent-Lancrin 2013; Martin et al. 2013). Susan Hallam's (2015) research review focuses specifically on music. It provides wide-ranging evidence on the 'power of music' and its importance for the intellectual, social and personal development of children and young people. In a recent and influential AHRC report (2016), Geoffrey Crossick and Patrycja Kaszynska dedicate a chapter to the value of arts in education. They focus on analysing the body of research that suggests education and participation in the arts brings a host of wider benefits for learning outcomes, development and skills. Interestingly, few of the studies they reviewed were able to identify more than a very modest increase in formal attainment. It is in the wider, transferable skills and qualities that findings become more significant. These might include communication and problem-solving skills, and self-confidence.

Crossick and Kaszynska (2016, p.116) stress that these skills and qualities – some of which are difficult if not impossible to quantify - should be given due import despite the fact that policy discourse might favour increases in formal attainment. They are also concerned about the trend for considering what impact arts engagement might have on other areas of learning. For instance, there is a frequently cited claim that music improves mathematical performance; rarely would this question be asked in reverse (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016, p.115). The authors raise concerns over the instrumentalism of the arts in learning as well as the hierarchy of disciplines (where maths and science jostle for top place) and conclude:

it may be more appropriate to see the importance of participation in the arts, and arts education, as less about a simple set of generic or transferable skills, and more as contributing to the *habits of mind* that provide a platform needed for all learning, such as following curiosities and possibilities, having a willingness to practise repeatedly, not taking things for granted, and developing a strong inner critic [our emphasis].

This is a fitting way of understanding the impact of the European Opera Centre's project and reference is made to these 'habits of mind' in the concluding chapter.

Given the wide-ranging, life-long benefits that the arts can reportedly provide, it is problematic that there is a lack of consistency of delivery of arts education. This is resulting in a growing divide between the cultural experiences of rich children and poor children. The Cultural Learning Alliance's report, *ImagineNation* (2017, p.3), claims that:

the arts and culture are not an add-on, or a nice-to-have, but are part of the fabric of our society, and that young people have a right to experience the best, and to be given the opportunity to make their own contribution to the continual reshaping of our civilization.

The report focuses on four areas or 'values' that cultural learning might impact upon: Social, Educational, Economic and Personal. There is an emphasis placed on social and cultural inequality and the need to redress this, and ensure that all families have a store of 'cultural capital':

Children and families who feel ownership of the arts and culture feel more confident in their ability to create, challenge and explore, to be a part of society and to make change happen. Children denied this access can feel locked out and left behind (2017, p.7).

The Warwick Commission Report (2015) shares a similar concern over lack of opportunity impacting on the future capacity of young people to benefit from – and indeed contribute to – the arts. In her foreword to the report, Vikki Heywood draws attention to the 'barriers and


inequalities in Britain today' that prevent 'a rich cultural education and the opportunity to live a creative life' from being a universal human right (2015, p.8).

In an influential government review on music education in England in 2011, Darren Henley expresses concern with the inconsistent provision of music education across the country. A key recommendation was for music hub provision in each local authority area, and the government continues to ringfence money for this (Henley, 2011). Henley commended the *In Harmony* music initiative and suggested the government continue to fund it for at least another year. *In Harmony* is a music education programme based on Venezuela's *El Sistema*. It encourages children in socially and economically disadvantaged areas to learn musical instruments and to take part in orchestral performances with the aim of strengthening community. One of the three pilot projects was established in West Everton, Liverpool in 2009 and is still going strong. It has included a longitudinal evaluation with regular reports published (eg Burns, 2016). Even one of its sceptics reported that his visit to the programme was 'an astonishing and inspiring experience' (Service, 2009). However, Service (2009) also makes it clear that children across the country need to benefit from daily music education and that this requires considerably more investment as well as celebrating what local authority music services do offer.

It remains the case that music education provision is patchy across the UK and that educational music projects such as the European Opera Centre's (which actually delivers a much wider educational experience than simply music) are to be welcomed. Hallam (2015, p.19) sets out the common characteristics of beneficial programmes:

They need to be highly interactive and enjoyable with opportunities for: developing new skills and performing; acquiring cultural capital; developing interpersonal bonds and solidarity in pursuing shared goals; on-going intensity and frequency of contact; developing mutual respect; and recognition and rewards for excellence. Receiving positive affirmation from others relating to musical activities, particularly performance is crucial in enhancing self-beliefs whatever the age of the participants. If performances are in high status cultural venues the impact is enhanced.

These characteristics have resonance with the European Opera Centre's project and will be revisited later in the report.



Chapter 3

Methodology

This evaluation aimed to qualitatively explore the experiences of those involved in the European Opera Centre's new educational programme launched at Barlows Primary School. Participants included school staff and supporters, pupils and parents, and the European Opera Centre's team. This involved:

- Investigating how the animated opera, *The Cunning Little Vixen*, might be used as an educational tool
- Considering how the project builds relationships through its collaborative approach
- Investigating and analysing children's experiences of taking part in the European Opera Centre's project
- Exploring the meanings that the project's stakeholders derive from the project (the school's staff and supporters, including parents, and the Centre's team of facilitators)
- Looking at the learning derived from the project for the children and the adults involved

The purpose of the evaluation is for the Centre to be able to review strengths and weaknesses of the project as they plan to develop it further and roll it out to more schools. The evaluation is also aimed at a wider audience: to inform readers of the content of the project, how it worked in the specific context of Barlows Primary School and how it might work in other settings.

There is much current debate over the most appropriate methodology to use when evaluating the impact of arts projects (see Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016 for detailed discussion). Choice of methodology very much depends on what is being measured or assessed. As discussed above, there might be instrumental reasons for carrying out arts projects in educational settings (such as improving grades and attainment) in which case outcomes would need to be quantitatively measured. For such an evaluation strategy to be sufficiently rigorous, it would require large, standardised samples and ideally a longitudinal aspect (ie measuring change over a prolonged period of time).

The European Opera Centre had more tentative, exploratory reasons for its foray into arts education. In the spirit of Hallam's (2015) characteristics of beneficial music programmes discussed above, it desired that project to be 'highly interactive and enjoyable' for all involved. It should offer a group of children from a highly economically and socially disadvantaged ward the opportunity to experience a range of artistic disciplines and to thus develop their cultural capital. It was also important to the Centre that the project developed relationships between its stakeholders and provided benefits to them. The ways in which these benefits might manifest were not predicted when the project was designed, but rather left loose and open. The Centre required the evaluation to describe the success or otherwise of the *methods* of working; process was of as much import as outcomes. The evaluation methodology was thus designed to qualitatively explore the experiences of those involved in the project, the meanings they derived from it and the learning they attributed to gaining from it.

It is also important to note that qualitative evaluation also lends itself to considering the importance of context. It does not assume that a project can be repeated with the same results. For instance, Barlows Primary School had particular facilities that they were able to offer to the project (for instance a large school hall that – apart from at dinner time – was able to be kept free for the duration of the week). Other settings might have different resources.

A number of complementary methods were employed to capture this diversity of perspectives: ethnographic observations, focus groups with the children using photo elicitation techniques and open-ended questions, focus groups with parents and stakeholder interviews. The evaluation centres on the week of intensive work although there is mention of some of the work that went into preparing the ground for the project. The work that the school put in to embedding *The Cunning Little Vixen* story into the curriculum for the term is acknowledged although this is not evaluated.

Ethnographic Observations

The principal investigator (Foster) was present at a number of the project planning meetings. She went on to observe the week-long activities that the European Opera Centre

carried out at Barlows, making notes and taking photographs to act as an aide-mémoire. She was introduced to the Year Five children by a member of teaching staff on the Monday that the work began and her role was clearly explained. Parents had already been informed of the evaluative work that would be conducted alongside the Centre's project and had signed permission slips to enable the observations to take place. Ethical approval for the evaluation had previously been gained from Edge Hill University's Faculty of Arts and Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

School staff and European Opera Centre facilitators were also made aware of the evaluation process and were reassured that it was not in any way designed to measure their competency. Foster made notes of some of the informal discussion between the Centre facilitators during break times. Again, the facilitators were aware of this and issues of anonymity and confidentiality were discussed. Foster also attended the meeting between the Centre and Barlows that took place after the project and that reflected on its success. These observations are drawn upon throughout the report, but particularly in Chapter 4, 'The Story', which draws on the observations to provide a descriptive outline of the project.

Focus groups with children

It was important that the evaluation captured children's own accounts of the project, as well as adults' interpretations of the children's engagement and learning. As Sorrell, Roberts and Henely (2014, p.73) argue, creative learning involves 'giving and receiving constructive feedback and sharing the process and outcome of the exercise'.

Three focus groups were carried out by Foster with 54 of the 61 children that took part in the European Opera Centre's project. The children were a mix of boys and girls and predominantly White British (88% of Barlows' pupils are White British). Several children opted out of the focus groups or left early because they did not want to miss an IT lesson that was taking place at the same time. The focus groups were held in a Year Five classroom during the week following the project. Children were divided into the groups that they had worked in for the project: one focus group was carried out with the Drama and Movement group; a second with the Art and Design group; the third focus group included the children

from both the Music group and Production group. (There were fewer children in Music and Production, hence they were combined.)

The purpose of the focus groups was explained to the children and they were asked to provide 'assent' if they wanted to take part. This involved filling in a simple form with their names, and circling a smiley face. Parents/ carers had already provided consent for their children to take part in the focus groups should they wish to do so. The focus groups all began with Foster showing the children a series of photographs taken over the course of the week's project. This 'photo elicitation' technique aimed to remind children of the activities they had taken part in. It proved popular with all three groups. The children enjoyed seeing the images and remembering moments from the week.

The children were asked about their first memories of being told about the project and watching *The Cunning Little Vixen* film. They were asked about the lessons they had had that linked to the film and their memories of the week-long project itself. This included the workshops they had attended, the groups they had chosen, the after-school options and their experience of Friday's performances. The children were also asked whether they would choose a different role if they were to do the project again.

Interestingly, each of the groups had a rather different flavour. The third one, which included children from Music and Production, was notable in that several children asked to leave the discussion before it had finished. These children were predominantly from the Music group where, it was noted, there was a relatively high proportion of children with special educational needs. A number of children from the Production group proved keener to ask questions of the researcher than to answer the ones she posed. They displayed a genuine interest in her university work and her background. This perhaps reflects the elements of their characters that led them to choose to work in Production. Alternatively, it could be that they were putting into practise some of the questioning skills they had learned during the week-long project.

Focus group with parents

Two focus groups were offered to parents and carers: one directly after school during the week after the Centre's project, and the second later in the evening in an attempt to

accommodate as many parents and carers as possible. Although the school sent out a letter about the focus groups, and they were mentioned on the day of the performance, only two parents attended. One was a parent governor who had a background in the arts and was thus particularly invested in the project. The second was a parent whose son had been in the initial performance at the Williams Liverpool BMW showroom. He had attended this performance as well as the one at the school, so again perhaps felt that he had a particular stake in the project.

Parents were asked about what their children had reported back about the week-long project and the programme of work that preceded it. They were questioned about the parental involvement element of the project and their reactions to the performance on the Friday. Finally, they were asked about what changes the project might have made for the children and their family. The sons of each of these parents were present at points during the focus group and added their own views to those of their parents. Permission was gained to use the resultant data in this report.

Interviews with key stakeholders

Nine semi-structured interviews were carried out with stakeholders between March and October 2017. In what follows, stakeholders are identified by role:

- The European Opera Centre's Chief Executive
- The School's Music and Performing Arts Lead
- Year Five Teacher 1 [Year 5/6 Phase Manager and Modern Foreign Languages Lead]
- Year Five Teacher 2 [Computing Lead]
- Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA)
- Teaching Assistant (TA)
- Senior School Improvement Officer ['assigned officer' to Barlows]
- European Opera Centre Facilitator 1 [Music]
- European Opera Centre Facilitator 2 [Production]

Participants in the interviews were questioned on their involvement with the European Opera Centre's project, their initial thoughts about the project and the highlights and lowlights of the work. They were also asked about children's behaviour and engagement and the potential transformative impact of the project. Questions were tailored for different participants. Teachers were questioned about how much, if any, extra work the project had required, and about their experiences of working with the Centre. The Centre facilitators were asked about the relationships they had developed during the project (with children, school staff and each other). They were asked to reflect on how the project might be improved and to consider what advice they might give to someone taking on their role in the project in future.

The data collected from this range of methods is presented below. 'The Story' is a descriptive account of the project. The following three chapters, 'Collaboration', 'Children's Roles' and 'Processes and Outcomes' discuss themes that emerged through the data analysis process. They draw on data from interviews and focus groups and present this data such that participants' voices can be heard. 'Collaboration' acknowledges the importance of collaborative working and considers the relationships developed during the project. 'Children's Roles' looks at the child-led nature of the process and discusses the children's responses to it. 'Processes and Outcomes' considers the learning that was gained through the project, both by the children and the adults involved and how the project might develop in future. Throughout these chapters, *The Cunning Little Vixen's* cast of animal characters appear, illustrating their due importance in the project's success. 'Coda' summarises the findings and relates them back to the Centre's aims and objectives. It lists a range of conclusions and recommendations.

The background of the page is a stylized illustration in shades of orange and yellow. It depicts a rooster on the left, facing right, and a fox on the right, facing left. They appear to be in a field or near some trees, with the fox's tail visible. The overall tone is warm and monochromatic.

Chapter 4

The Story

This chapter provides a descriptive outline of the European Opera Centre's first educational project. It took place at Barlows Primary School in Fazakerley, North Liverpool, during the last week of March 2017 and involved all of the school's Year Five pupils. There were 62 in the year group, aged between 9 and 10 years old and 61 were present during the week. Usually, the children were divided into two classes, but for the purposes of the project they were mixed. The school had agreed to collapse the timetable Monday to Friday so the whole of the week could be devoted to the project. Before this week of activity began, the European Opera Centre had held a series of planning meetings with the school. These involved developing ideas for the Centre's project and for the scheme of work that the Year Five teachers produced for the half term leading up to the Centre's project. This incorporated a wide range of subjects: Maths, English, Spanish, Philosophy, Computing, Art and Music.

The European Opera Centre's project involved eight facilitators working with the children from Monday to Friday on a range of four key subject areas that would be required to devise and stage a short opera performance: Art and Design; Drama and Movement; Music (Composition and Performance); and Production. Two performances were scheduled for the Friday, the first for the school and the second for families to attend. The first two days of the project consisted of workshops on each of the four subject areas. Each workshop was led by two of the European Opera Centre's facilitators and there was always a teacher or teaching assistant present because not all of the facilitators were DBS checked, although they did receive a talk from the school on Child Protection (see Chapters 7 and 8 for recommendations concerning DBS checks). Teachers divided the children into the four groups and these groups attended each workshop in rotation. Children attended two workshops on each of the subject areas over Monday and Tuesday so that they were able to get a real 'taste' of what each involved. The plan, then, was for children to choose their favourite of these areas to work in for the remainder of the week.

This design was instigated by the school's governor who had led on the collaboration. The European Opera Centre had initially planned to have one day of workshops in order to leave time for devising the performance: 'I was nervous that could you create an opera production in two-and-a-half days from scratch, having written the music, the libretto, and done the direction, and done all the marketing' (the Centre's Chief Executive). However, it

was agreed that it would be a 'richer' experience for the children to have this experience of all four subject areas before choosing the one they wanted to stick with. There were pros and cons to this model as outlined below in 'Continuing the Process' (Chapter 7).

Preparation

By day one of the project, the children were already fully versed in the story of *The Cunning Little Vixen*. A small number of them had already been involved in the launch event at Williams Liverpool BMW showroom and had performed a short scene from the opera, partly in Spanish. All the children had watched the DVD (both English and Spanish versions) and written a prequel to the story. They were increasing their Spanish vocabulary, learning the Spanish words for the vixen and the other animals that populated the opera, as well as adjectives to describe the characters and verbs to denote how the characters moved.

The children had also researched and written about the habitats of red foxes, and had devised calligrams: poems whose words shaped themselves into the form of a fox. In maths, they had carried out an opera budgeting exercise, considering what elements might be required to put on an opera, how much these would cost and how to stay within budget. The maths classes at Barlows are streamed, and the lower ability set was also able to take part in this by teachers adjusting the numbers and questions.

Children had also discussed their ideas about opera and teachers reported back on some of these conversations. Most of the children associated opera with singing and were apparently interested to hear about the storytelling element. One pupil, a teacher told us, had thought that singers needed to take a special pill to enable them to perform opera. The weeks leading up to the project, then, provided an informed grounding for the children. The Higher Level Teaching Assistant who was involved in supporting the Centre's project usually works with Year Six pupils, so had not been involved in any of the work that was based on *The Cunning Little Vixen* before the week-long project. He admitted to being 'amazed' by the children's working knowledge of the Janáček opera.

If the children were prepared for the project, so were the Year Five classrooms. The doors to the rooms were transformed into woodland scenes and, Narnia-like, provided entrances to

spaces that dripped with the work the children had already produced inspired by the animated opera. Pictures of foxes covered the walls and thought clouds posed questions such as 'What does 'cunning' mean?'; 'What is a vixen?' There was an air of excitement amongst the Year Five children as the week began. Most of the European Opera Centre's eight facilitators began the week with enthusiasm but also with a series of anxieties about the project. For the majority it was the first time they had worked with children and they were unsure how they or the project would be received. Some, but not all, of the facilitators had met each other beforehand. Most were graduates from Liverpool Hope University, but from different disciplines. One was a current undergraduate student, another a postgraduate student. One of the facilitators had considerable experience of production management and had worked for the European Opera Centre in this role in the past.

By morning break, there was a sense of relief as the facilitators and the Centre's Chief Executive, who was present during the entire week, got together to share notes. The school had provided a room for the Centre's sole use so the group met before the school day started and during breaks and lunch time. This proved a useful resource and allowed for lots of fruitful discussion. On the first day of the project this centred around how well the children knew the story of *The Cunning Little Vixen*, and how different groups of children had provided different experiences for the facilitators. Some were more inventive than others, and some more argumentative. A notably creative suggestion from one group in Production was to have feathers blown by a wind machine to illustrate the 'chicken massacre' scene.

The workshops

Each group began with warm up activities so that the facilitators and children could get to know each other a little. In the first of the Art and Design workshops which took place in a Year Five classroom, pupils busily planned and made 3D model theatre sets depicting the four seasons. This was an activity the Centre's Chief Executive was keen to include after discussions with the Head of Fine Art at Liverpool Hope who had suggested that people never get taught 3D thinking in the fine arts until they arrive at university. Generally, though, the facilitators had devised their own activities. The 3D theatre set activity began

with children writing ideas down about colours and feelings for each of the four seasons, working in small groups. Then they got busy with paint and card, cotton wool and glitter. In Tuesday's Art and Design workshop, the children made costumes based on the animal characters of *The Cunning Little Vixen* using painted corrugated card, sandwich-board style. The inventive (if messy) results included one badger with a cardboard top hat and another wearing a monocle, a fox wearing an England football kit and a glittery green frog.

The Drama and Movement workshops took place in the school hall and again drew upon *The Cunning Little Vixen*. Children jumped around like frogs or strutted pompously like the badger, waddled like chickens or hopped like rabbits. They had to guess each other's characters and much laughter ensued. At other times the children depicted the seasons through movement. The hall was a whirl of energy all week.

The Music group had sole use of the school's music room which reverberated with the sound of children clapping to the beat of a drum, chanting words and phrases from *The Cunning Little Vixen* (in both English and Spanish). Later they began to create melodies for each of the characters using a wide range of musical instruments. It was noisy at times and some children could be seen holding their hands over their ears on occasion. One of the Music group facilitators admitted that her own ears had been ringing at the end of the day, and from then on she discouraged the use of drums.

Production was more sedate, but no less eagerly received. In this group, one of the facilitators took the role of Stage Manager, the other of Director. The success or otherwise of these roles are discussed below in 'Continuing the Process' (Chapter 7). On the first day of the project Production took place in a classroom, but for the remainder of the week it was held in the school's library because the classroom was required for another use. There were a number of computers in the library that the children were able to make consistent use of. The children made lists of props that might be needed for a production of *The Cunning Little Vixen* and found objects around the classroom they were in that might be useful.

Interestingly, when one of the facilitators first posed the question about which props might be needed, the children were silent. As soon as she prompted them about *The Cunning Little Vixen* film and some of its scenes, the classroom was full of arms waving in the air and a myriad of ideas. The children also had to find objects that would create interesting sounds

for the imagined production. Other tasks included discussion in small groups over how children would produce particular scenes from the animated opera.

At the end of these two days, children were asked to choose which of the four groups they would like to work in for the remainder of the week. The results of the vote were fairly equal, but the school took the decision to move more of the children into the Drama and Movement group so that their parents would be able to see them perform in the production.

The chosen groups

The atmosphere among the facilitators was enthusiastic on Wednesday morning. They had met the previous evening and drafted a story for Friday's production that was based on the children's ideas. This gave them something more concrete to work with and made the goal of Friday's performances seem achievable. The facilitators were happy with numbers for their groups and were all relieved that the children had enjoyed their subject enough for some of them to choose it as their 'favourite'. The atmosphere changed when it transpired that school staff had swapped some of the children out of the groups they had chosen (notably Art and Design and Music) and into the Drama group. The Drama facilitators were concerned that they would struggle to control such a large group; the Music facilitators were concerned that this shift resulted in low numbers for them. This issue is discussed further in the sections 'The Centre's facilitators' in Chapter 5 and 'Adults' learning from the process' in Chapter 7.

On the Wednesday and Thursday, children attended their chosen (or assigned) groups. The story for the production was relayed to the children who were generally happy that it incorporated their ideas. There was some disagreement over the ending: some children thought the Vixen should die at the end whereas others were relieved that the tale had a happy ending. One boy was particularly concerned that the Badger should be in the final production (and was relieved to hear he was). These were industrious days with each of the groups preparing for their part in Friday's production.

In Art and Design, the children busied themselves with designing sets and costumes for the production's changing seasons: bare trees and snowmen, flowers and sunshine. Facilitators explained how they had learned from previous days and wanted to give children more time to think about and discuss designs before starting to create them. In the Drama group, auditions were held for the main roles in the production. This seemed to go remarkably smoothly with little disagreement among the children. They also discussed ideas for songs which were then relayed to the Music group.

The Music group, focusing on composition and performance, had a lot of work to do. They created melodies for each of the main characters in the production as well as setting to music the songs that the Drama children had written. The facilitators recorded the work that the children had produced on the melodies and then one of them played them into the computer and overlaid them with strings. This meant that the melodies could be played straightforwardly in the final production; given the lack of time for rehearsing it became clear that it would have been difficult for the children to play live.

In Production, the children were assigned a range of tasks. Some undertook risk assessments, others diligently engaged in the programme design and made posters to put up around the school advertising Friday's events. The children that had been given stage management roles spent time in the main hall with the Drama group. On Wednesday and Thursday there was an option for all children to keep working in their groups after school, and parents and carers were invited to join their charges. Several parents took up this offer and were to be seen helping with programme design and costume making and even learning to move around like *The Cunning Little Vixen's* cast of animals (see the section 'Parental involvement' in Chapter 5).

The performances

Friday morning was a whirlwind of last-minute preparations for the afternoon's two performances of *Barlow's' Cunning Little Vixen*, one for the rest of the school and one for the parents. When the school hall became available after lunch, all hands were on deck to set up the room and to put out chairs for the adults. Children struggled into their costumes for the early afternoon dress rehearsal. This was not a great success. The school's staff

visibly panicked as children forgot lines or delivered them in inaudible voices. Directions were shouted at the children from various adults stationed around the hall but there was very little time for the children to do any more preparation before the performance to the rest of the school (see the section 'Adults' learning from the process' in Chapter 7). Perhaps surprisingly, given the dress rehearsal, this was a strong performance. The children in the audience received it enthusiastically, laughing uproariously at the humorous performance from the chickens.

The programme that children in the Production group produced outlined the 20-minute performance as follows:

Scene 1

The mother loses her cub. She starts to worry and looks around for her baby vixen. However, she still can't find her. She keeps searching the forest and asks the different animals in the woods, 'Have you seen my baby?' She encounters the grasshopper and the frog.

Scene 2

The vixen keeps on asking the animals to help the vixen but no one helps her. She finds the rabbit and then the poacher but they still don't help her with her journey to find her precious little vixen.

Scene 3

The mother vixen is still looking for help, and finds the badger. But he still doesn't assist her, so she keeps looking for an animal to help.

Scenes 4 and 5

The vixen goes to sleep and has a dream. She dreams about all the characters in our heart-warming opera and thinks she is never going to find her baby vixen. She then finds her vixen in real life.

Scene 6

The chickens have a little team talk to end the outstanding opera.

At the end of the school day, families poured into the hall for the final performance of *Barlows' Cunning Little Vixen*. This performance was even more polished than the previous one and was rapturously received. The Centre's Chief Executive gave a talk to the parents and carers to explain what the children had been doing in the days leading up to the performance. All the work they had done, whether behind the scenes or on stage, was acknowledged. Each of the groups in turn received much applause and children were all awarded certificates. T shirts commemorating the occasion were then available for purchase from children in the Production group. Such positive affirmation is one of Hallam's (2015) main criteria for a successful music project (as outlined in Chapter 2) and is 'crucial in enhancing self-beliefs' (Hallam 2015, p.19).

The following three chapters, 'Collaboration', 'Children's Roles' and 'Processes and Outcomes' present data collected through focus groups and interviews. Although the data has been organised into themes, it is presented in a way that enables participants to tell their stories and allows their voices to be heard. Chapter 8, 'Coda' provides more detailed analysis of the data, draws conclusions and lists recommendations.



CHAPTER 5

Collaboration

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, the project was collaborative in its nature. The European Opera Centre worked closely with Barlows Primary School throughout the planning and delivery of the project. This contributed to its smooth running and inarguable success. Although this is the first school-based, educational project that the European Opera Centre has been involved in, it is no stranger to collaborative working. Indeed, its collaborations have reached across Europe (and most recently they have spanned continents). Asked to reflect on the collaboration involved in the project at Barlows, the Centre's Chief Executive replied:

I hadn't thought of it in relation to this, but the only way to work around Europe is in partnership: you can't suddenly arrive somewhere and then propose what you want – you have to find a way of working together.

He continued to think about *The Cunning Little Vixen* animation project itself and the collaboration involved in that: 'we discussed whether we should have an overall Director, a conventional Director, and we didn't, so we had an Animation Director, but we didn't have an Opera Director, and we all contributed. It was almost a collective.... And that was a really good way of working, a really strong way of working.'

For the project at Barlows, a number of relationships were important to the project as well as that of the Centre and the school. For instance, the Centre's relationship with Liverpool Hope University helped in the recruitment of the project facilitators. It was also necessary that this team of facilitators was able to work productively together and form good working relationships with the school's staff and pupils. There was also a desire to involve parents and carers as much as possible in the process. This chapter of the report explores these various relationships, drawing predominantly from the interview and focus group data.

The European Opera Centre and Barlows

It was Barlows' Chair of Governors who first had the idea of collaborating with the European Opera Centre because she knew its Chief Executive and was aware of his early ideas around developing an educational project. Barlows' Head Teacher received these ideas with much

enthusiasm and thus the project began to take shape. (Unfortunately, the Head Teacher was on sick leave during the execution of the project, but the Acting Head took over its running with and was equally committed to supporting it.)

Having senior leaders involved at this stage in the process can be important in terms of prioritising a project and making it happen, as the Senior Schools Improvement Officer reflected:

If you've got a key person, like the Chair of Governors or the Head Teacher, who really embrace the project, then they can pull the strings to make it happen. Whereas, if you were a really enthusiastic classroom teacher, you'd heard about the project, you've got then to sell that to your senior leaders and to your governing body.

Fortunately, the classroom teachers were also enthusiastic about the project, although the Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) who was involved in the initial meetings and supervising the children throughout the intensive week of the project recalls an initial hesitation on his part:

Honestly, it was like, 'Well, opera is not my thing.' I didn't know what to expect at all. As I say, opera, it's never interested [me]. Although I love music and I love teaching the children music and the various things that we do in the school, it was completely alien to me.

(Interestingly he became one of the greatest champions of the project and reported feeling bereft when it had ended.)

The two Year Five class teachers were heavily involved in the planning and delivery. The school's Music and Performing Arts Lead co-ordinated the project. As well as the HTLA, a Teaching Assistant (TA) was involved supervising the children's involvement in the project, although she did not attend the planning meetings. The Music and Performing Arts Lead reflected on the 'productive' nature of meetings. She believed these were a key to enabling the project to 'run smoothly'. She also spoke of the efficiency of the European Opera Centre and the fact that any emails she sent were answered within the day. Year Five Teacher 2 commented on the collaborative nature of the meetings: 'everyone was putting their pitch

in, everyone was bouncing ideas...everyone listened to each other. So it wasn't a case of school just ran the project, it wasn't a case of the European [Opera] Project - they didn't run it, it was a team effort, which was nice to see.'

Despite the careful planning, there was still very much an element of the unknown about the project. As the HLTA recalled:

The people that were involved, we knew that we'd be able to deliver this and we'd be able to do it the best we can, but really, 'Do we really know it's going to work?' I think that got said quite a few times during the process, and certainly at the start of the week.... We arrived on the Monday and we didn't really know what was going to happen.... Until you throw 60 children in there you don't know what's going to happen. It could be planned meticulously, but until those 60 children are there doing it....

This involved a necessity to work flexibly and to adapt to the changes to the school timetable. Children required escorting around the school to the various rooms where the project was taking place. Year Five classrooms were showered with glitter and daubed with paint during the art and design workshops. Yet this did not appear to faze any of the school's staff involved in the project, nor indeed those that were not involved but witnessed the change in Year Five's routine for the week. This was perhaps in part down to the way that the children engaged with the project. Behaviour was impeccable as they moved sensibly around the building and courteously held doors open for others. One teacher reflected:

I didn't find it was disruptive because I felt like all the children were on task. If the children weren't on task, then I would say it was disruptive but they were. Every single workshop they went to, they were on task, they were focused (Year Five Teacher 2).

The teaching staff were asked whether they felt that the project had been a burden on their time, particularly in terms of lesson planning. The Year 5 teachers replied in the negative and the Music and Performing Art Lead commented that this planning would have been required anyway, whatever the topic. She did go on to say that the only thing that 'put on people's time' were the lunchtime meetings, 'because we did have quite a few of those'.

Again, though, the fact that these had gone smoothly seemed to mitigate any resentment over missed lunch breaks.

The Centre's facilitators

The European Opera Centre put together a team of eight facilitators to carry out the project. As described above Chapter 4, most of the facilitators had been recruited through the Centre's links with Liverpool Hope University. The Chief Executive of the Centre reflected on the success of this:

I think having those easy personal relationships within the creative campus at Hope is a huge help.... To be able to call on the academics, I think, is a great strength and I think that is a lesson I've learned for the future. I'd always want to do that.

Most of the facilitators did not know each other and this, according to the Centre's Chief Executive, might have been why they were able to work so well together: 'You put together a team who've never met each other, and they always cohere, much better than if they were all from one place'.

Certainly, they worked together productively and with little problem. As one explained, 'the team just gelled' (Facilitator 2). She also acknowledged that the Centre's Chief Executive 'is very good at just bringing people together'. There was just one artistic difference between two of the facilitators at a stage on the project when 'it was getting really chaotic and getting really intense' (Facilitator 1). The older, more experienced member of the team was able to intervene and smooth things over. She reported that generally, the younger facilitators handled the project 'brilliantly' (Facilitator 2).

The fact that the school was so accommodating played a big part in this. Facilitators spoke of how 'welcoming' the school was: 'They were great, they couldn't do enough for us' (Facilitator 2). Another facilitator agreed and had admitted that had been 'a worry' for her: 'Because it was outsiders coming in, but it didn't feel that way at all, they seemed really excited about the project as well, which then put me at ease, that they actually wanted us there' (Facilitator 1).

The school's staff spoke equally highly of the facilitators. One teacher noted that, given that none of them had a background in teaching or working with children, 'they did an exceptional job'. She reported a conversation she had just had with the HLTA:

He was saying, 'Oh, if we did it again, you'd love the same people to come back.'
Obviously, they wouldn't be able to, all of them, but they were so good and the children really responded well to all of them.

Another teacher described the facilitators as 'friendly and professional' and pointed out how good it was for the children to have 'new people' involved in their school day. A third teacher commented on the flexibility of the facilitators; as above, this was a necessary quality for this way of working. The HLTA was impressed with the speed that the facilitators learned the children's names, and the way that they kept control of the classes. The TA, in an interview that took place a few weeks after the project said:

I think if they all came back in again now, they'd all be welcomed with open arms, sort of thing, from all the children and the staff.

Some of the children in the focus groups spoke fondly of the facilitators without being prompted. One girl described them as 'nice and kind'. The children had a rather different relationship with the facilitators from those they had with teachers, calling them by their first names. One of the parents that took part in a focus group commented that a 'real positive' of the project to the children was 'gaining the relationships' with the facilitators. Another parent agreed and noted how, 'They had a short, compact period [of time], so they obviously successfully did build that relationship quite quickly'.

In preparing the facilitators for the project, the Centre again drew on its links with Liverpool Hope University and a member of the University's Music Department delivered a talk on Janáček's *Cunning Little Vixen*. (Another preparatory talk was delivered by the Chair of Governors on Safeguarding as mentioned above.) This was just one element of a project that provided a real learning experience for the team, and not just those that intended to go into teaching. A number of the facilitators commented on the fact that the skills they were learning would be good for their CVs. One of the facilitators was undertaking an MA in Music and was basing her thesis on the project. One facilitator, who had worked with the

Centre on previous projects, spoke about how this previous work had developed her interest in opera: 'I love it now, so it does open your eyes to what it's about'.

The way that the project developed facilitators' skills and experience is very much in line with the Centre's overall ethos on training:

We work, not by running a year-round programme of training – a lot of opera studios would do that. But we try and devise interesting projects that will train people, through the project itself – train them through doing – and also raise their profile (The Centre's Chief Executive).

The project also had an educational element for the school's staff. It not only developed their knowledge of arts projects, it also proved a learning experience in terms of what the children were capable of. This is discussed further in Chapter 7, 'Processes and Outcomes'. As briefly outlined in 'The Story', there was one occasion when the school made a decision about the project that was not discussed with the facilitators. After the children had chosen their specialist groups to work in for the remainder of the week, the school swapped some of them out of the Art and Design and Music groups into the Drama group. This, it transpired, was so that the children's parents and carers would be able to see them on the stage. However, the Art and Design children were also to be on the stage, dressed in the costumes they had designed and made. The desire to please parents took over the understanding that 'it is the process that is important, not just the product at the end' (Facilitator 1). For one of the facilitators involved in the Music group, this decision impacted on the work she was doing. She describes how she and the children had formulated plans 'together as a group'. The children had expressed a desire to play live and they had planned for that, but when some of the children were removed from the group 'we just couldn't manage it' (Facilitator 1). The group ended up audio recording the children's work and the facilitator worked on the melodies using a computer programme so that they could be played during the performance. Although the facilitator worried that and she worried that 'Music had lost out' because of the school's decision, the children themselves did not raise this in the focus groups – or elsewhere – as an issue.

Parental involvement

The European Opera Centre decided that it wanted to involve parents and carers as much as possible in the project after the launch event that took place at Williams Liverpool BMW showroom in December 2016. There was such enthusiasm displayed by those parents in attendance for the forthcoming project that the Centre wanted to continue to enlist this support. From Barlows' point of view, enlisting parental involvement and support can benefit in particular ways. For instance, as the Senior School Improvement Officer pointed out, one of the challenges that the school faces is that of student attendance. Indeed, persistent absence is a big issue in North Liverpool more generally. He discussed Barlows' strategy of having a 'balanced, broad curriculum' so that children will 'have a greater desire to come to school'. Of course, this is not straightforward: 'It's hard; it's challenging' (Senior School Improvement Officer). There are myriad reasons why a child might be absent. However, there does seem to be some evidence that children's involvement in the arts can boost school attendance (see Thomson et al., 2009, p.16).

Certainly, during the week of the project, there were reports of Barlows' pupils expressing a strong desire to come to school. The Teaching Assistant had twin children in Year Five at the school. She reported that during the week-long project, 'each day, they were really, really excited to be coming to school.' Year Five Teacher 1 reported:

Some children were coming up to me and saying, 'Miss, I got up at 7:00 this morning, because I couldn't wait to come in.' They knew where they'd left a scene. If they were in the Production team, they knew where they were up to. They came straight in that day, and they knew where they were up to. They were just really hands on, and they got the job done, at the end of the day.

One of the parents in the focus group pointed out that she had never seen her son 'so excited and enthusiastic to come to school and stay in school as well'. The HLTA involved in the project reported that he'd spoken to parents who had said that their children 'couldn't stop talking about' the project. He noted that these might not necessarily be the children who would usually go home and talk about what had happened at school.

As discussed below (in 'Continuing the Process'), for any lasting transformations that involvement in the arts projects might create, children's family and social circles need to be

involved. The Senior School Improvement Officer acknowledged that 'it's definitely important to have the parents involved, to celebrate what the children have been doing, but equally, perhaps, to expose the parents to some cultural activities that they perhaps have never been able to partake in'. The Centre's Chief Executive agreed, pointing out that although the Centre is not at the school 'as marketeers for any particular opera performance', if it 'helps break down a little, just barriers to people's thinking about the arts, then that is a great thing, isn't it?'

It is also worth considering - following the argument outlined in Chapter 2 that arts projects need not be instrumental in their aims – that it is enough that parents enjoyed seeing their children being excited about school, and that they enjoyed the performances and the sense of pride they felt in their children. The Centre's Chief Executive, who spoke to many of the parents after the performance, observed this pride that people felt in their children having done an opera. It was generally felt that there was something prestigious about this. Year Five Teacher 2, reflecting on the performance, told us:

You could see [the parents and carers] were made up seeing it. They said, 'Oh they've really enjoyed it. And they keep talking about this 'Cunning Little Vixen'. And the fact that the children were talking about it at home, the parents were obviously engaged with it and you could see by the end of the performance that the parents enjoyed it as well. So it was really great to see.

The after-school activities on the Wednesday and Thursday (as described above in Chapter 4, 'The Story') had around a dozen parents attend over the two days. There was unanimous agreement amongst the project's stakeholders that this had been a successful aspect of the European Opera Centre's work at Barlows. As the Music and Performing Arts Lead pointed out, to have the extra hour on each of those days was a benefit in terms of achieving the aims of the project within the tight time frame. Yet it was also a real opportunity to involve parents in an enjoyable aspect of their children's education. A parent that took part in a focus group wholly agreed: 'I just think it gives a bit of a better insight into what they're doing in the school, rather than just turning up on the day and see, but also all the other things that have gone along to get to that point.'

Another parent in the focus group had spoken to a number of other parents and carers who had come along to the after-school activities, and said how they had 'really loved being involved'. It had given them an insight into what their children were doing at school and enabled them to talk about it. She described how some parents helped make costumes; others assisted with stage management. The parents of the children in the Drama and Music group were initially more fazed by their involvement. 'First of all were like: "Oh, no, we don't want to have to do this" [Laughter]. But actually, they really got into it, really enjoyed it and had fun.'

One of the facilitators of the Drama and Music after-school activity was enthusiastic about it:

I think it was nice of them to see what the kids were doing throughout the week... and I think the kids thought it was hilarious. [The Music group facilitators] got roped into doing the animal movements, and things like that, so all the Music lot were laughing at us because we were trying to do those. So I think it just changed the balance a bit.

This parental involvement aspect thus might be seen as contributing to the shift in the balance of power between adults and children that the child-led ethos of the project encouraged. One of the facilitators did point out that there might be a danger of some children feeling left out because their family members could not make it, but those children that did have parents come in 'loved it' (Facilitator 2).

The background of the slide is a monochromatic red illustration. It depicts a traditional Chinese interior. In the center, a person is seated on a low stool, facing away from the viewer. To the left, another figure is partially visible, seemingly engaged in a task. The room is filled with various objects, including a large circular mirror or mirror-like object on the wall, a small table with a vase, and a large, ornate chair or stool on the right. The overall style is reminiscent of traditional Chinese ink wash painting, but rendered in a solid red color.

Chapter 6

Children's Roles

This chapter focuses on the way that the Year Five children engaged with the European Opera Centre's project. It draws from adult stakeholders' observations as well as from the children's own feedback in focus groups. The project was always intended to be child-led. The European Opera Centre's Chief Executive had always been very clear on this: 'In devising the project, we came to the firm conclusion that the children had to be in control.' There was also an emphasis on inclusivity and choice. The Centre's Chief Executive explained:

I pushed quite hard for that, because I did hear quite a few times ... 'You can't involve 61 children in a project, it is too many', and that some will have to be just in the audience. And I said, 'No, everyone has to do something. We can think of all the disciplines'. ... I think one of the traps is that you mention opera to people and you get put in the music slot. And actually, this involved music, involved the creation and the performance of music, but a lot else as well. It is truly multi-disciplinary and children could avoid the music if they didn't want to do it.

This ethos gave a particular flavour to the project which is explored in this section. Discussion begins with 'A child-led process' in which stakeholders in the project discuss the way that children engaged with the project and took ownership of it. 'Children's engagement with *The Cunning Little Vixen* film' attributes some of the success of the project down to the use of the film as a teaching tool and includes children's own responses to the animated opera as well as those of adult stakeholders. 'Children's reactions' centres on children's feedback on the week-long project as well as stories from adult stakeholders about children's enjoyment of the process.

A child-led process

The Senior School Improvement Officer reflected on his experience of coming to watch the performance of *Barlows' Cunning Little Vixen*:

I thought, prior to coming to the performance, that basically they would be given a script, they would be given the costumes, they would be directed, but all of that responsibility was put onto the children themselves, which I thought was fantastic.

He noted how every child was included and 'It wasn't a case of, "You lot, we're going to give you something else to do."' He believed that this was very much in line with the school's existing ethos: 'It's a very inclusive school'.

The Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) reported that the highlight of the project for him 'was the fact that it was all children-led'. He elaborates:

For me it was more about the fact of what the children individually were getting out of it. Even if they weren't involved in the drama side or the music side, just seeing children taking on different roles. There wasn't a time when you went into any of the rooms or any of the workshops where they weren't doing anything. It was like they'd come in on the Wednesday and the Thursday and they knew what their job was and they'd walk in and they'd just start doing it straightaway.

One of the Centre's facilitators explained how she embraced the process and how it benefitted the children involved:

I wanted children to decide on what was going on. And I think they felt more important and more part of it, that it was their work and their project, and they could make decisions. ...I think if we just went in and told them what to do, even though they would have enjoyed it, I don't think they would have got as much out of it as they did (Facilitator 1).

Whereas all the children we observed were thoroughly engaged in the project, there were particular children who surprised the school's staff and the Centre's facilitators with their level of involvement. A pupil who took on the stage manager's role actually took charge of the project and pulled its various strands together. The HLTA reflects on how the girl had watched an early performance by the Drama group and written 'reams and reams and reams' of notes on 'the whole play and what people were doing and where they were expected to be'. When, later in the process, she was asked by one of the Music group facilitators to come to the Music group and relay what was happening in the Drama group, the outcome was astonishing:

I went in and she knew every single part of the play. She didn't have any notes with her. She knew every single part of the play. She knew what every single character

said, so that when they were putting this music together or the order of the music, she was there. She was saying the lines of the play and then she said, 'Right, so we need to leave that for 10 seconds as they walk across the stage now. Then they say something else and then we can put the music back on.' I said to her, I said, 'How do you know it all?' She said, 'I don't know. I just do.' She knew the whole thing back to front. It was unreal (HLTA).

One of the Music group facilitators corroborated this as she discussed the extent to which the pupil helped her:

On the Thursday and the Friday, she spent a lot of time with me so I could sit and put the music in the right place. And she knew the whole thing off by heart... she had said this happens and she said the dialogue, so we know how long it went on for and things like that. So I don't think I would have been able to finish the music without her (Facilitator 1).

Other children proved surprising too. The HLTA described one boy who worked closely with the pupil in the stage management role. He was involved in playing the music throughout the performance and was left in charge of the music system. A Year Five teacher reported that a highlight of the project for her was seeing how children 'embraced a completely different thing than they're used to'. She gives an example of how the project 'brought them out of their comfort zone:

There were children in my class who said, 'Oh, I don't like music.' I'd say, 'Why don't you like music?' 'I just don't enjoy it.' They came out of the music lesson and said, 'I like music now. I want to join in the workshop.' It was a boy who's quite big on football who said that and I said that's had a massive impact because he's completely different (Year Five Teacher 2).

The Music and Performing Arts Lead noted how she saw 'a lot of children that came out of their shell that wouldn't usually; unexpected children'. She continued, 'and then you saw them on the stage, and they just shone'. It was not only the children on the stage that shone. She also spoke about observing the children working on the marketing materials in the Production group:

They were creating posters and they were asking how they could better it, so they weren't just saying, 'Oh, I'm done now.' They were saying, 'Oh, well, what could I do?' and they were helping each other, going, 'Oh, well, you can add this border around. I'll show you.' It was just little things like that, and I feel like that made such a big difference, because I think in class, you have to not force it but you have to say to them, 'Right, now, we're going to help each other and look at each other's work.' They were doing that (Music and Performing Arts Lead).

There were a number of children with special educational needs in the Year Five group. The school did not draw any particular attention to them, but it did become clear to the facilitators that some of the children were closely accompanied by Teaching Assistants. Interestingly, the majority of these children gravitated towards the Music group. One of its facilitators discussed how the TAs assisted in this regard because they knew the children and their particular needs. She also reflected on how a number of children in the Music group were ones that she imagined 'don't usually feel like they achieve very much'. She believed it was the way they were able to engage in the workshops on the first two days of the project that led to the success of their involvement in the Music group, and reflects on one Year Five girl in particular:

x is the one that sticks out in my mind, because ... I remember the first workshop, the main things I was saying to her was, 'x sit still, x put the beater down, x don't touch that'. Whereas in the second one, she did really well and gave some good ideas and sat still and concentrated, because she would have felt like she was actually giving some - she was contributing rather than just being told to be quiet all the time, really. So when she left the second workshop, she said, 'Oh, I'm picking Music for tomorrow'. So she came in with all this confidence all week, and I think I could see the same with the others who felt like they were actually contributing (Facilitator 1).

One of the Year Five teachers noted how these children in the Music group 'worked together and bounded off each other with their ideas; they were really animated with it all'. She added, 'They pulled it together, didn't they?' (Teacher 1). The HTLA that worked closely with the Music group pupils 'loved the fact' that those with special educational needs did the music for the production.

Even when one of the other groups came up with words to a song, the main Vixen theme tune, they just brought the words in and one of the children started singing it with no prior knowledge of what it should sound like. She looked at it and just started singing it. ... That was one of the children with behavioural problems and additional needs. She started singing it. That for me was just like, 'All these kids are included. All these kids are involved. Their ideas are valued.' That really stood out over the week.

The parents who contributed to the focus group appreciated the praise that all the children were given. A father told us: 'I think the positive thing for me as well was that the other children who weren't involved in the performance were acknowledged as well – their contribution towards it as well. Because sometimes it's always that the people in front get all the applause'. It was on the day of the performances that parents 'could really feel the buzz around the whole thing' (mother in parents' focus group). The children were 'all so excited and animated, and I think the parents really were as well when they came in'. She continued:

It was superb...they really enjoyed it, and that was a great thing, to see their enthusiasm and their enjoyment levels from it. And as parents to see, if you had gone to the workshops, how you'd seen it come together and how amazing it was. Even if you hadn't, well, they did it in a few days. They got these fantastic costumes together. They wrote these songs. They'd learnt these songs. They'd learnt these words. They learnt all the stage management. All the different aspects. These children.

Children's engagement with *The Cunning Little Vixen* film

It was *The Cunning Little Vixen* film that provided children's initial engagement in the project, and it was felt to be a great success in introducing them to opera as well as to the European Opera Centre's project. A number of the stakeholders that we questioned admitted that they were unsure how the children would react to opera. One of the Centre's facilitators was interested in seeing this reaction because 'Normally you mention opera to

children and you would think it was too high-brow for them, but they were really into it.’ One of the Year Five teachers told us that her initial reaction to hearing about the Centre’s project was ‘How are the children going to take it?’ However, she continued, ‘once I had watched the animation and saw how child-friendly it was, I knew, straight away, that the children would be really engaged, which they were’ (Year Five Teacher 1).

The school’s Music and Performing Arts Lead agreed:

I think, maybe, if you’d have said ‘opera’ to them at the start, they might have thought, ‘Oh, no, I won’t like that. That’s not cool,’ but then, because it was ‘The Little Vixen’ and it was a good story for them to understand, I feel like they really, really were engaged with it.

One of the Centre’s facilitators thought that this introduction to opera might mean that the children were more likely to engage with opera in future if they got the opportunity to. Rather than say “‘Oh no, that is not us”, they’d probably go, “Ah, okay. Now we know what to expect”” (Facilitator 1). Another of the facilitators had worked with the Centre before and explained how she had developed a love of opera through this previous work:

I just thought opera was loud singing. I have been watching it now for a while and it’s the stories and it’s funny. You don’t realise that operas can be comedy, you think it’s all very straight laced, you know?

She believed that *The Cunning Little Vixen* is an ideal introduction to the genre, ‘because it’s a cheeky little opera, isn’t it?’ She also thought that ‘the fact it was animated really helped’. The humour of the opera was certainly not lost on the children. When asked about the film in the focus groups, virtually all the children that answered spoke about how funny they had found it. One girl commented that ‘it had nice music’ but all the other feedback centred on the humour. They had found the chickens hilarious, particularly the ‘chicken with the glasses’. (Indeed, the ‘chicken with the glasses’ became a rhythmic chant that was oft heard emerging from the Music group once the project got underway.) A girl in one of the focus groups had liked it when ‘the vixen peed on the badger, and when the grasshopper was going to the pond’. A pupil in a different focus group also brought up the scene where the vixen ‘weed on the badger’. One boy found it funny ‘when the frog jumped on the forester’s face’, another ‘when the owls were like, “Scandalous!”’.

The teaching staff involved in the project had watched the film prior to the children viewing it and had decided to omit a scene which featured the badger drinking heavily. Whilst they were confident that most children would enjoy the animated opera, they were surprised at some of the children's enthusiasm. Year Five Teacher 1 noted that it was 'great to see' some of the more unexpected children enjoy the opera. The Music and Performing Arts Lead admitted:

I think that was probably from my misconceptions and preconceptions of opera. I knew that some of them who had that performing arts, dance and musical background would enjoy it. This might sound a bit sexist, but the boys... I was very surprised at how they got into it and they were fully immersed.

As described above in 'The Story', the children had undertaken a series of lessons based on the film. In the children's focus groups, pupils, when prompted, remembered with enthusiasm some of the lessons they had had that linked with *The Cunning Little Vixen* prior to the European Opera Centre's week-long project. A number of children recalled writing a prequel to the story. One girl told us how her story had involved the vixen being taken away and microchipped. Another memorable activity was the budget planning in maths. A lot of the children could remember the amount of money they had had to spend on putting on an opera, and what they needed to spend it on. One pupil explains:

And you had to like, now in that maths thing, how many actors you could use in the whole thing at night, how many nights you want to show them for. And then they need to spend under £15,000.

Another pupil recalled that they had to budget for 'all the costumes'. A third talked about the tickets. Her maths set had had an £8000 budget.

With some coaxing, a number of the children remembered some of the Spanish vocabulary they had picked up during lessons that linked with *The Cunning Little Vixen*: el zorro; el tejón; el pollo; el liebre. A boy recalled doing a story board and a girl remembered: 'We had to draw our own little scenes, which we thought would happen after that'. Lots of the children spoke about the calligrams they had created in the shape of foxes or foxes' heads: 'so we got a picture of a vixen, and then we put words inside it'. Some even remembered the word 'calligram'. Several also mentioned the non-chronological report they had

undertaken on the habitats of red foxes. This was all spoken about with enthusiasm and the words 'enjoyment' and 'liked' were frequently used.

One of the Year Five teachers spoke to us about how she thought the comprehension exercises that they had carried out with the children were particularly valuable because it allowed them their 'own perspective of the story'. She described how they initially watched the film scene by scene, providing 'snapshots' for the children to think about and discuss. This also allowed more questioning and discussion of the characters: 'Why did the character act that way? How do you think they felt at the time? It got them really involved with the characters.'

This knowledge of the film and its characters provided a huge advantage to the week-long project. The Centre's facilitators all commented on how much time this saved and how it had simplified their jobs. On the first day of the project, facilitators' conversations centred on how very familiar the children were with *The Cunning Little Vixen*, down to the smallest details. For instance, one pupil had suggested that a blackboard would be needed for a prop. However, the blackboard only appears on screen for a matter of seconds. Other pupils had picked up on the loneliness of the badger character.

As the Centre's Chief Executive pointed out, the children also understood the characters musically, 'because of course the idea of creating in sound a little motif for each of the characters they're portraying, well that again is terribly sophisticated. But it was their decision to do that.' Year Five Teacher 2 noted that with their performance, the children had taken the film 'to a new level'.

Children's reactions

Contributing to the parents' focus group, one pupil declared of the Centre's project:

It was just like living in heaven for a week, for me.

He continued: 'Literally, I'd pay £300 to do it again. If not more. Empty my bank account.'

The school's Music and Performing Arts Lead told the following story:

[The children] loved it. I heard them. One day, they didn't know I was there and I was walking down the corridor. I heard them go, 'No, no, that was something to do with the vixen,' so I knew what they were talking about. I don't know what they actually said, but they were discussing it outside of the classroom. That's really nice, when you hear children in the yard and things like that talking about something they've done in class. It really makes the job worthwhile, so that was good.

As previously mentioned, the TA that took part in an interview had twins in Year Five and she told the story of how her daughter's involvement in the project continued even into her sleep:

Each day, they were really, really excited to be coming to school. [My daughter] was a chicken, when she was downstairs, in Drama. I remember one morning – I think it was the Thursday morning – we came out of the house, and she walked to the car, acting like a chicken, and making chicken noises. Then, on the Friday, after the production had finished, we were at home, and she'd gone to bed. I woke up in the middle of the night, and I heard chicken noises coming from her bedroom. She was being a chicken in her sleep. I just couldn't believe it, but do you know what? I laughed so much. It was so funny.

This is perhaps less surprising when it is considered just how immersed the children were in the project, from the lessons beforehand to the final performance. Children's reactions to the different phases of the project are outlined here.

The workshops

The focus groups themselves involved a lot of laughter as we looked at the photographs from the week and remembered what had taken place. The children spoke a lot about what they had done in the workshops in the earlier part of the week. All four of the workshops were mentioned in the discussion. One girl liked the Drama because it was 'quite funny'. Many of her classmates agreed and there was a lot of reference to the chickens. When asked if there was anything else they had liked about Drama other than being chickens, one boy recalled, 'Oh, when we had to come up with a little show'. Interestingly this group of

children had all gone on to choose Art and Design as their specialism despite having very much enjoyed the Drama.

One boy (who had also chosen Art and Design) told us how: 'I liked Music, because you get to use all the different instruments'. One girl in the same group talked about how she had liked playing the xylophone; another said she 'liked making different melodies for a track'. In the focus group with children who had specialised in Drama, there was talk of enjoyment of creating rhythms in the Music workshops. One girl said, 'I liked the music, when we were trying to make rhythms with our feet'.

A pupil that had chosen Drama and Movement talked about how he had liked it in the Production workshop 'when you had to try and find some toys that made some noises'. His classmate had enjoyed it in Production when 'we got to make our own like short paragraph and it was like a design for a poster'. Another of the pupils that had specialised in Dance and Movement said that in Art she had 'liked the box things', referring to the 3D sets they had constructed on the first day. Other pupils had enjoyed making the costumes from cardboard. This prompted a humorous discussion on the mess involved. Some children had got paint in their hair; one boy had got a 'massive bit' in his eyebrows. Most of these children said that they liked or loved getting messy; a couple said they hated it because it meant having to have a bath or a shower.

Across the three focus groups, there were a few children that had not particularly enjoyed certain workshops. A girl in the Production group told us, 'I didn't like the Music, because I thought it was too confusing'. A girl in the Art and design group had also struggled with the Music workshop: 'It was giving me an 'eadache, it was a bit loud'. A boy who had chosen Art and Design said that there was too much writing to do in Production and a girl in the same group agreed that it 'just wasn't as fun as the others'. A boy in the focus group with the Music and Production groups said, 'I never liked the Drama much, because after we did everything, I was really tired'. A second boy in this group said that he did not like Drama 'because it's too girly'. In the chosen groups, only five of the twenty-five Drama children were boys. Art and Design was evenly split between boys and girls, as was Music. In Production, however, there were nine boys and just one girl. It was extra girls that the school moved into the Drama group, however all members of the Production group were

self-selecting. It is beyond the scope of this evaluation to consider the gendering of primary school children, but it would make for interesting research in future to pursue this.

The chosen groups

The children in the focus groups were then questioned about the groups they had chosen to take part in for the remainder of the week. In the focus group with those that had specialised in Drama, there were several pupils who had not put this as their first choice. However, there did not seem to be any ill feeling about this. One girl was happy because she had been cast as the badger; another had enjoyed being a rabbit. One did say that she would have preferred Art and Design. There was amused discussion amongst other members of the group about the trouble they had had with their costumes: 'And we had this wig on [laughter]. And it kept falling off, and going across the floor'.

The Art and Design pupils had a discussion about the freedom they had in their group. One boy said that 'I mean I liked it, because we got to kind of do whatever we wanted'. He went on, 'You were your own boss'. Others agreed. They were generally pleased with the 'colourful' costumes they had created and talked about wearing their costumes on stage. Several had been trees, one a sun and one recalled: 'I was a flower, and I was very small'.

The children that had chosen Production spoke of the varied range of activities they had undertaken. One boy 'liked making the posters, telling people where to go, and putting them all up'. Another liked 'going on the computers and being in charge'. She continued, 'I got to go down to the Drama, and direct the scenes'. Those that had chosen Music were also enthusiastic about their choice. One girl said, 'I liked playing the music... and I liked hearing it'. A boy talked about enjoying being on the keyboards. Another liked the 'dream scene' because that is when he got to play.

There was a mixed response from the children when they were asked whether they would choose a different group next time round were they to do the project again. Many of the children said that they would like to try something different, whilst others would stick with their original choice. A few were clear that there were particular groups that they would not want to do and none expressed regret at their choice.

Some of the children in the focus groups had taken part in the after-school activities with parents/ carers on the Wednesday and Thursday. They all appeared to have enjoyed this. When one group was asked if anybody in attendance would rather have gone home, one girl answered quickly, 'No, because it was fun'. Those pupils whose parents/ carers had attended the Drama and Music after-school group spoke enthusiastically about getting their family members involved. 'I got my Mum up', one pupil told us. Another said, 'I got the Music teachers up, and so they were really tired'. Another put on the indignant voice of an adult, 'How could you do this! (laughter)'. A boy told us that his mother had enjoyed doing the poacher movements; another parent had enjoyed being a chicken. Another mother had liked doing all the actions 'except the frog'.

Two of the children in Production talked about their family members coming after-school. One boy said his Nan had 'corrected a lot of spellings' (presumably in the marketing materials he had been working on). A girl said that both her Mum and had Nan had come and they helped do 'the cut and pasting'. Some children were clear that they did not want to stay after-school and so they had chosen not to.

The performances

The children were then asked about the performances themselves. This garnered a very mixed response. One girl noted that: 'I didn't like the way we only had two days to do it, it was a little crammed in, yes'. However, others disagreed. One boy said, 'No, I liked the days'. Another had enjoyed it *because* it was rushed and he was kept busy. And, as one girl pointed out, 'If we never rushed, we would be still here doing it now'.

This debate continued when the children considered the performance they had delivered to the rest of the school. One pupil hadn't enjoyed it because it was rushed. Another agreed: 'Yes, I didn't feel quite ready, the way where just like, where I was sitting, they were all going, "Go on, go on, go on."' One girl, however, said that she saw it as an opportunity to 'rehearse in front of people' ready for the performance for the families. Others agreed: 'I liked doing it in front of the school, because I felt prepared doing it in front of the parents'. Some children loved having the opportunity to show the school what they had been doing. One said, 'It was fun showing off in front of people, all of them'. Another boy enjoyed having

the chance to demonstrate the hard work they had put in: 'The way we all got to show that we've actually created this play ourselves'. A third boy liked being able to demonstrate what the Year Fives were capable of to the older pupils: 'It was good, because you could show the people what you could... maybe like in Year Six, we could show people like, we can do certain things'. There was certainly a sense of pride taken by the children in what they had achieved. One girl reflected: 'I liked the way that well we came up with the play, and all the lines and everything'.

Some of the children had enjoyed the laughter that the chickens had provoked amongst the rest of the school (and themselves). 'I think it was fun, when the chickens were being silly, and all the children were laughing,' said one pupil. 'I liked the way they were waving their bums all over,' said one girl. Others said that the performance was 'scary'. One girl reported that she was 'shaking the whole way through'. A boy admitted, 'And I actually, I was nervous, because I didn't realise how many people were actually there'. Another boy said, 'It was kind of embarrassing, when you had to stand there in front of them, because like you know you shouldn't laugh, you have to take it seriously, but then they're all smiling'.

One of the boys in Production had enjoyed sitting 'on the sidelines' and watching the play. A girl in Production had enjoyed a more public role: 'I liked it too, because I got to introduce it, and like ask everyone to stand up'. Another girl had enjoyed her role as prompter: 'Because I was like behind the piano, giving people, saying what they wanted, and that, and they kept on getting their lines wrong'. A girl in Music had enjoyed playing music, 'like at the end. When everyone was going out'.

The children then spoke about the performance for the families. Again, there was a mix of reactions to this. Again, there were those who found the performance 'scary'. One girl said that she did not enjoy either performance because 'it was really hot' and she felt faint. However, one girl was pleased that 'everyone came for the occasion,' and a number of children had evidently enjoyed performing for their family. One boy announced that 'I got to perform in front of my Dad'; another said, 'I got to make my sister laugh'. A third boy reported, 'When I stood up at the end, my Mum gave me a smiley face. Yes, she was just smiling at me'.

A girl from the Art and Design group told us: 'My Mum thought the costumes were amazing'. A pupil in Drama thought it was a good opportunity to show parents 'that you have a talent, for doing those animals'. One girl's mother seemed to have been rather critical: 'she said that I needed to be very louder'. The girl later considered this: 'I liked it, because maybe, when you make them laugh, because when people learn something, so maybe that's why we had to be louder'. A number of children had family members who could not attend. Some told us that their parents were at work; others were 'going out' or 'busy'.

Some children talked about creating and selling t-shirts, an activity that the school arranged. Dozens of white t-shirts were printed with the outline of a vixen's head. Like a coat of arms, this was divided into four segments, each representing one of the four disciplines that the project had focused on. The dates that the project took place were included so that it provided a souvenir of the work. The t-shirts proved popular despite being rather on the large side. A number of the children, boys and girls, reported that they were wearing them as pyjamas.

The following section, 'Processes and Outcomes' gives more thought to the memories that the project might have created, and the seeds that it might have sown. In the focus group with the pupils that had chosen Art and Design, one child reported that they wanted to be a costume designer; two other want to be art teachers. There were also references to skills or qualities that the children had developed. One boy noted that 'I think we got used to working as a team, with all the people'. He went on to say, 'I liked the teamwork, because you get to work with people that you don't usually know'. One pupil also mentioned increased confidence gained through the project (a girl in the Drama group). These are considered in more detail below.



Chapter 7

Processes and Outcomes

The European Opera Centre's educational project stressed the process of the work rather than the finished product. Although the finished performances were important, emphasis was on the experience of the process. This was unanimously agreed by all stakeholders to be the best way of working. This chapter considers those processes in relation to the outcomes of the project. It begins by looking at what the children learned through the project. Whilst, as the last chapter stresses, enjoyment was an important element of this, there were also reports of children developing qualities such as empathy and confidence as well as forming new relationships. These are discussed in 'Children's learning from the process'. The project proved to be a learning experience for the adults involved, so in 'Adults' learning from the process', thought is given to the ways in which this transpired. 'Continuing the process' looks at how some of the lessons learned might feed into the ways in which the project is rolled out in future. It considers how transformative such a short-term project can be and how its benefits might be extended.

Children's learning from the process

In the previous chapter on the project's child-led process, it was suggested that the enjoyment the children experienced was important in its own right. However, the project did also contribute to their development. Year Five Teacher 2 summed this up as she reflects on the child-led ethos of the project:

I think that was great because it wasn't just about the learning, it was about them themselves growing. It wasn't about understanding the show, it was understanding the characters and about themselves and what sort of things they can do.

This illustrates a holistic view of learning. The Senior School Improvement Officer observed:

Lots of teachers would be saying, 'Is that going to improve our English SAT results? Is that going to improve our maths results?' which are fair questions, but I think you should also be asking: 'Is that actually going to sow the seed with some of our children that one day they'll go into technical design, working in a theatre, or they'll go into film, movie production? Or will they become a dancer? Or will they become a singer?'

The European Opera Centre's Chief Executive expressed similar sentiments when he discussed his hopes that the project might have 'planted an idea' that the children will live with: 'I don't mean that they're going to all become opera stage managers, but perhaps there was something in that project about public speaking, about organising, about team-working that they'll then remember as they develop'. As discussed in the previous chapter in 'Children's reactions', career choices were mentioned in the children's focus groups. In addition, one of the Year Five teachers reported that children were already talking about their future careers based on their experiences of the Centre's project. One child wants to work in the film industry, another in costume design.

The Senior School Improvement Officer went on to say that he would like to think that children's memories of the project turned out to be lasting ones, and that after the Year Six SATs, when children think about the highlights of primary school, the Centre's project would feature. The TA involved in the project is adamant that this will be the case for each of the children involved: 'I think everybody will know and remember something really nice about the whole week.' She stressed that this was peculiar to the Centre project; other school activities might be remembered by some children but not others.

The Senior Level Teaching Assistant, some weeks after the project had taken place, told us how on two recent school trips the children had been heard singing the songs they had devised for the play. On a day trip to Goodison Park, over lunch, one of the girls 'started singing the songs and was singing every song as well.... They were in there [in her head]. They were stuck in there' (SLTA). On a trip to the Lake District, 'we were climbing a mountain, but as [the children were] walking up they're singing these bits' (SLTA).

The TA attributes the success of the Centre's project in this regard to the fact that children were doing what they most enjoyed. For instance, 'Some of the children really enjoy doing music, and I think if they could, they'd do music all day long.' She also noted that working as a team was particularly valuable, 'especially the ones that really were doing the things that they wanted to do.' Year Five Teacher 2 liked seeing children from different Year Five classes working together. This had been a highlight for one of the pupils in the focus groups as mentioned in the above section.

For one of the parents in the focus group, the intensity of the working relationships that developed over the week reminded her of when she had been involved in putting on a theatre production in the past: 'You all felt a sort of a kinship with them at the end of it.' She reflected that this sort of experience was not a common one in primary school and it was one of 'so many valuable tools' that came from the week.

Year Five Teacher 1 reported that a highlight of the project for her had been seeing 'the children using their creativity and taking ownership of the whole project'. She reflected on the 'life skills' that children developed:

They had to organise and prepare and manage in a specific timeframe. They had to understand the logistics of putting a production together. So I think that was brilliant for them ... and obviously, they were independent, weren't they?

Year Five Teacher 2 talked about the 'resilience' that the children displayed on the Friday when it looked to the staff as though the performances might not work, 'and then they just absolutely took on the role and they showed everyone it was their show.' She also talked about the impact the project had on children's confidence. Whilst she acknowledged that children are building their confidence throughout the year anyway, she found that the project 'was building on their confidence in something completely different to what they're doing in class'. She observed:

There are children who might have been quite quiet who now are quite happy to take on a role, they're quite happy to - if I say, 'Would anyone like to help out?

Would anyone like to come up in front of the class?' they will put their hand up (Year Five Teacher 2).

Facilitator 1 described how the project might have led to an increased empathy in the children as she commented how the children 'sort of delved into' the what the animal characters were feeling and the social situations they were going through in ways that 'were really quite intense and complex'. She was also keen to stress that in addition to developing children's personal qualities, the project did develop music skills. In her opinion, it is essential that people have a good experience of making music when they are young or 'they grow up thinking they're not musical, which everyone is, in their own way' (Facilitator 1).

Adults' learning from the process

The child-led ethos of the project meant that teaching staff had to relinquish some control over the process. One of the Centre's project facilitators described some of the challenges of a child-led process and the delicate balance that's required:

It's difficult, when you are creative, to be able to stand back and not push your ideas. Of course, you have got to try to maybe manipulate a little bit, if you think it's going to go wrong, you have got to try to pull them back in and voice what may go wrong if they do it that way, and stuff. It's a learning curve as well for [the children]. It's not just a matter of letting them loose and being all over the place, you have got to rein them in a little bit. But basically, they should own it.

Barlows Primary School was, for the most part, very much on board with this way of working. The Senior School Improvement Officer notes that some schools might be more controlling than others. He explained:

It's the degree of control and it's how much you're allowing children to develop their own character. Clearly, you've got to have rules; clearly, there have got to be sanctions, but some people are uncomfortable when children are given a greater degree of those kinds of freedoms. I think that it very much depends on the institution and the way the institution is led.

Other than the instance when the schools staff swapped some of the children's chosen groups around (discussed above), Barlows' staff enjoyed seeing the children take ownership of the project and made no attempt to interfere with the process. However, on the day of the performances, and the school's staff witnessed a rather shambolic dress rehearsal, there was a palpable sense of panic. The SLTA recalled,

The dress rehearsal, it was all over the place. I remember thinking, 'We need at least another half day.' That's probably the only thing where I just thought, 'The school week needs to be longer' (Laughter).

Year Five Teacher 2 had similar memories and recalls the teachers all feeling 'anxious' and 'concerned'. 'After the dress rehearsal we thought, "Oh my gosh, are we going to be able to

do in time?" ... "Have we got enough time to get a polished performance?" ... "Is it not going to show what the children can do?"

There was concern that the parents and carers coming to watch the performance 'might have just thought, "Have they actually done anything all week? Why is it in such disarray?"' (HLTA). There was also concern that a poor performance might negate 'all the great things' the children did during the week and 'they'd focus on, "Well, we didn't do a very good performance," and I just didn't want that for the children' (Year Five Teacher 2).

Fortunately, 'a bit of a miracle' (Year Five Teacher 1) occurred between the dress rehearsal and performances. The HTLA describes how, 'all my fears went away as soon as the first production came on.... It was amazing.... I just remember thinking, "These aren't the same children that were in here 20 minutes ago"'. The way that the children 'just pulled it out of the bag' was one of the highlights for Year Five Teacher 1.

Given the anxiety and panic over the dress rehearsal, it was perhaps no surprise that the school's staff became much more involved in the project and that 'the teachers took over a little bit' (Facilitator 2). She continued: 'Yes, they really needed not to interfere, because you need one director, and when you've got so many directors, the children don't know who to listen to'. She also recalled that the facilitator that had taken on the role of Director 'really wasn't getting a chance to do his stuff'. The Senior School Improvement Officer pointed out that 'if you give those freedoms [ie let the children lead a project], you've got to see what's going to come.' However, he did acknowledge that this was easier said than done:

I think, as a former teacher myself, if you're doing the weekly performance, it's your class, you want it polished, you want it choreographed, you want it... Speak up; make sure you're directing it. So, I think perhaps the teachers were thinking, 'I've got no control over this'. That's the sense I got.

There was learning to be had from this incident. For instance, Facilitator 2 thought it was problematic that the facilitator acting as Director was based in the Production team. She thought it might make more sense for the person taking that role on in future to be based in Drama. It also proved a learning experience for the school in terms of understanding what the children can achieve:

In regard to the teachers, I feel like it's made changes. I feel like we now know what the children are really capable of, and although we are very child-focused with the child-initiated in Barlows, I feel like it's highlighted that they can pull off a massive performance. I feel like that's changed for us (Music and Performing Arts Lead).

Reflecting on whether this experience, which she refers to as 'a real eye-opener' might change the way that the school approaches projects – in particular performance-focused ones – in future, she admitted that this is something the school has discussed and 'it would be lovely if we could' have future school performances more child-initiated. 'However, in that way, you might need the experts then to try and guide them in the right way because we wouldn't necessarily be able to offer everything.'

Facilitator 1 discussed her experience of working with schools during her postgraduate studies. She has found that teachers often lack confidence when it comes to delivering music. If they do not have any teachers that specialise in music, she noted, they tend to bring in specialists. For instance, at Barlows a violin teacher came in and delivered weekly string instrument sessions. She hoped that the Centre's project would inspire the confidence for schools to be able to deliver more creative music projects themselves; for children to be encouraged to 'compose and improvise and be creative' (Facilitator 1) rather than focus on the technical side of music as instrument lessons tend to. She saw the 'biggest problem' with music education in schools as being teachers not knowing what to do. If they had the knowledge of some of the ways in which music education could be delivered, they could 'use it to do other things, like use it in music with poems – making the poems into songs, and things... and then looking at different musics and different cultures'.

Continuing the process

The European Opera Centre's project left the school 'on a high' (SLTA). The SLTA told us about the anti-climax he felt when it was over:

I remember thinking on the Friday, 'We've got to go back to doing normal school things now.' I think a lot of the volunteers were saying that as well. The volunteers told me that they loved it as well, they'd loved the whole process. Even they were of the same thing of, 'Right, what do we do now?' It really did feel like we'd done it so

well. Obviously, the production was the climax of the week, but after that it was like, 'Let's go away and do normal things now.'

One of the parents in the focus group similarly reported that her son was 'very high' after the performance and then later he was 'really sad' that these 'amazing experiences' were over and he would not be seeing the facilitators any more. However, she also told us that 'everyone feels that we've been really blessed and really lucky to have this at Barlows, and we really appreciate it. I really think that it would be such a shame if this as a model didn't continue forward. Either we could have it again here, or at other schools as well.'

There might also be further opportunities for the children involved in the pilot project. The Centre's Chief Executive is keen that they experience an operatic performance, drawing on the Centre's contacts. Ideally the children would be allowed to see behind the scenes and meet some of the technical staff, 'because they've done it themselves and it would just take it on naturally to the next level'. This idea has met with full support from the project's stakeholders we talked to. The Senior School Improvement Officer thinks it would be 'wonderful,' particularly if parents were involved so that the cultural experience was had by the whole family.

There is certainly the aim to repeat the project at Barlows with next year's Year Five children: 'seeing the result that we did have, we thought this would be great for next year' (Year Five Teacher 2). There are also plans to roll the project out to other primary schools in Liverpool. The school has also advised the European Opera Centre on other potential schools that may want to take part in the project in future and Barlows will contact these schools (who are in the same Learning Partnership as Barlows) on the Centre's behalf. Barlows has also suggested that A-level students may be able to contribute to the delivery of the project in future, an idea that the Centre is keen to explore. Again, there is a sense of collaborative working described earlier in the report.

Everyone we spoke to was confident that the project could work in other settings, although it was noted that schools would have to be 'flexible enough' and be willing to collapse the timetable for a week (Music and Performing Arts Lead). The question of roomings was also one that was frequently referred to in interviews with teachers and facilitators. One advantage of conducting the project at Barlows Primary School was that there were plenty

of separate rooms which could be appropriated for the project, including a stand-alone music room. It was also observed that other schools might have fewer Year Five children, which might slightly change the scope of the project. Facilitator 1 thought this could be advantageous: 'You might be able to delve in deeper ... into more detail about the, sort of, how the music is made, how to write the play...'.

Interviewees also discussed the roles of project facilitators and school staff as well as the timetable for the week. There were differing views on whether one facilitator per group would be adequate. Most of the facilitators enjoyed working in pairs, especially given that for most of them it was their first foray into educational work. Facilitator 2 thought it would work to have a lead and an assistant, or even just one facilitator per group and an overall project manager. If A-level students were to be engaged in future projects, it is possible that they could act as 'assistants' to one project facilitator per group.

Facilitator 2 felt that having just one day of workshops rather than two would give more opportunity to prepare for the production. Although most of the adults questioned felt that the timetable worked very well, a number of children did talk about feeling 'rushed' towards the end of the week. At the same time, they clearly enjoyed taking part in the different workshops and the activities they undertook, so there are no clear answers.

Asked to give advice to future project facilitators, Facilitator 1 remarked:

Just be prepared for absolute chaos, but don't worry, because that is what is going to happen. That is the main thing about, what most generalist teachers don't like about music is that it is complete and utter chaos, no matter what you do, and it will come together eventually, but you've got to not expect it to all work perfectly And I think the other main thing would be to let the kids do as much without you as possible – let them lead it.

It was noted by the Centre's Chief Executive, who observed the entirety of the project, that it would have been useful for the project's facilitators to have had DBS checks. This would have enabled them to be alone with children at times. Particularly towards the end of the week, when children were required to move around the school more as they prepared for the production, putting up posters and meeting people, 'I felt we were creating a strain on the school's resources, that we needn't have done, if we'd had the right documentation in

place' (the Centre's Chief Executive). The Music and Performing Arts Lead thought this was less of an issue at Barlows, but that other schools might have fewer staff involved in which case it could be more problematic.

The European Opera Centre was disappointed by the fact that the ipad the school was using to film the performances ran out of battery early on in the first performance and thus there is little record of the actual performance. Lots of photographs were taken throughout the week, but the ones from the last day of the project were unable to be retrieved so there is no record of the children in their costumes and on stage or receiving their certificates. The photographs that were taken were understandably rushed and not always well composed. The Centre's Chief Executive has spoken of a plan to mitigate this in future; a plan that is true to the spirit of the project. A number of children in the Production group will be given a 'Media' role and equipped with cameras so that they can document the project's processes. The final chapter of the report summarises this learning gained through the European Opera Centre's first educational project and provides some recommendations for the project when it is carried out in future.

The background of the slide features a stylized illustration of a rooster and a hen in a field. The rooster is on the left, facing right, with a prominent yellow comb and wattle. The hen is on the right, facing left, with a smaller yellow comb. They are both rendered in shades of orange and yellow, matching the overall color scheme. The background is a gradient of orange and yellow, with some darker orange lines suggesting a field or fence.

Chapter8

Coda

The project undertaken at Barlows Primary School was the first time the Centre had worked with children in an educational setting. It was intended that it would act as a pilot project and that the learning gained through carrying it out would feed into future iterations of the work. The Centre's aims were deliberately kept loose in order to explore how the planned processes would play out in practice. There were particular ideas that were integral to the project and these included the use of the Centre's ground-breaking animated opera, *The Cunning Little Vixen*, as a teaching tool; the notion that the project should be child-led; the desire that the project should be an enjoyable learning experience for all involved; that it should offer a group of children from a highly economically and socially disadvantaged ward the opportunity to experience a range of art forms and to thus develop their cultural capital; that it should develop relationships between its stakeholders and provide benefits to them.

This final chapter of the report provides a series of reflections on the evaluation findings. It refers back to the European Opera Centre's aims and considers the extent to which these were achieved. In so doing, it considers the project findings in relation to recent literature on the value of the arts in education, some of which is outlined in Chapter 2 of this report. 'Creativity and education' reflects on the potential value of creative projects such as the European Opera Centre's. It presents the argument that the benefits children might gain from a creative project need to be understood holistically. Enjoyment in the present moment is important and should not be neglected in favour of seeing creative learning entirely as an 'investment' for children's future lives. The Centre's project led to a range of benefits, some more easily articulated than others.

'The vixen and friends' section focuses on the success of *The Cunning Little Vixen* in engaging the Year Five children. It reflects on the use of storytelling and humour. This section also considers how the film provided a bridge between the Centre and the school and enabled teachers to deliver the curriculum in relation to the opera. 'Cultural circles' thinks about the role of culture in lessening inequality. The way that the project exposed the children to opera and involved their family circles is discussed. The chapter ends with a list of conclusions and recommendations for taking the project forward.

Creativity: past, present and future

There remains fundamental disagreement in educational theory about the purpose of education in society and what the contributing role of creativity and the arts should be. Sir Ken Robinson, a well-known contemporary figure in the field of creativity and education, understands creativity as being the means to keep children's 'voracious appetite for learning alive', rather than allowing this appetite to 'dull as they go through school'. It opens children's minds and enables them to fulfil their potential (Robinson and Aronica, 2016: p.xvii-xviii).

A schooling system that relies on continual testing is antithetical to this approach, and there has been criticism of 'instrumental' approaches to arts education where the focus is on attainment (Crossick and Kaszynska (2016, p.118). Indeed, Robinson's own work has been challenged by more radical thinkers because it appears to be very much focused on what the economy needs, in particular the desirability of having a creative workforce in a post-industrialist age (Torn Halves, 2012). Sorrel, Roberts and Henley's (2014, p.69) argument for creative and cultural education also sees it as producing 'generations of job-creators, not just job-seekers, vital for a world of continuous and rapid change'.

Finney (2011) sets out a framework for a child-centred progressive tradition in music education that emerged in the 1950s. This includes viewing childhood as a distinctive time in its own right: it is not simply a vehicle to adulthood. The idea of children as 'beings' rather than 'becomings' is also one that is frequently discussed in the Sociology of Childhood (see James and Prout, 1997). For Finney, the music lesson seen from this perspective needs to 'make sense now', in the moment. Of course, a good experience might well lead to 'a life-long love of learning and the possibility of making a contribution to a better future for all' (Finney, 2011, p.6), but this is not necessarily the case.

There is scope to see both sides of this argument when assessing the findings from the European Opera Centre's project. Indeed, the findings from the project suggest that these two positions are not mutually exclusive. A number of the project's stakeholders expressed the hope that the project would have 'sown a seed' in the children that took part and enable them to flourish in the future. Some of the children themselves described how it had fuelled particular ambitions in terms of future careers. Simultaneously, there were lots of

reports of children's engagement and passion during the week that the project took place, with children being eager to come to school each day and to pick up where they had left the project the previous day. An inarguable success of the project was this enthusiasm and enjoyment it provoked in so many of its participants. There are reports (from children and adults alike) of children's increased self-confidence gained through the project. This is one of those attributes that has been linked with arts projects but is 'complex and difficult to measure' (Crossick and Kaszynska (2016, p.116). Sorrell, Roberts and Henley (2014, p.101) cite a report from the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities (2011):

The study of drama, dance, music and the visual arts helps students explore realities, relationships and ideas that cannot be conveyed in simple words and numbers.

Again, as discussed in Chapter 2, Crossick and Kaszynka's (2015, p.115) notion that creative projects might best be understood as developing 'habits of mind' is pertinent.

The children particularly liked having control over their learning during the week, and working with the Centre's facilitators in ways that differed from the usual, perhaps inevitable, hierarchical relationships with teachers. In Finney's (2011, p.6) model of child-centred progressive music education, relationships formed will involve 'some revealing of selves, and what we are teaching and learning will be an interpersonal matter and come to be of mutual interest'. Certainly, the relationships described in the findings chapters of this report are in line with this. Sorrell, Roberts and Henley (2014, p.73) define an *essential* characteristic of creative learning as being collaboration. The children at Barlows worked co-operatively with each other throughout the project as well as with the adults involved. Moreover, the concepts of collaboration and co-operation applied to the relationships between the various adult stakeholders in the project who, as outlined in Chapter 7, also learned much from the project.

The vixen and friends:

Much of the success of the project is attributed to the animated opera *The Cunning Little Vixen*. The animated opera was an excellent way in to the European Opera Centre's project. The film also acted as an ideal introduction to opera, an art form that combines music and storytelling. The humorous narrative and charming visuals, alongside the music, captured

the imaginations of the children and the adults who watched the DVD. Storytelling, and ‘our propensity to tell and love stories’, according to Sorrell, Roberts and Henley (2014, p.91) is ‘at the root of the nation’s creativity’. Phillips (2012) explores the use of story as pedagogy and how it can lead to new insights and discoveries in its audience. Importantly, it can enable ‘a walk in the shoes of another’ (Phillips, 2012, p.113). This is in line with the observation of one of the project’s facilitators that children were able to understand the animal characters’ motivations and empathise with some of their actions (See Chapter 7).

Feedback from children themselves centred on how the film made them laugh. Garner (2006) reviews a range of literature that alludes to the benefits of humour in teaching. Humour might serve as a bridge between educators and students by demonstrating a shared understanding and a common psychological bond. It might also help learners to engage by creating a positive emotional and social environment in which defences are lowered and students are better able to focus and attend to the information being presented (Garner 2006, p.177). Glenn’s own empirical research into humour as a pedagogical tool concludes that it can be an effective means of improving learning and enjoyment of learning: ‘The “ha-ha” of humour in the classroom may indeed contribute to the “aha!” of learning from the student’ (Garner, 2006, p.180).

The Cunning Little Vixen film also provided teachers with an ideal way of introducing the children to the project and to link the Spring term’s work to curriculum objectives. In the spirit of collaboration, the school’s Year Five teachers drew up an innovative programme of work that covered a number of different subject areas. The school has agreed that this might be shared with other educators in future. This adds another dimension to the week-long project and follows Henley’s recommendation that whilst schools should be encouraged to work with external organisations, the projects on offer should link more closely to curriculum objectives (Henley, 2011).

Cultural circles

Socioeconomic status has a very large part to play in whether children are likely to flourish or not through the education process. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1973) is well known for his concept of ‘cultural capital’. This centres around the resources that are developed in

early life through the process of socialisation and that develop according to social class. They are not taught through the education system, but having access to them means that children are better able to benefit from education. For example, the breadth of vocabulary spoken at home will impact on a child's ability to understand teachers' instructions. Having regular family trips to museums, galleries and theatres will provide some children with opportunities not afforded by the school. Thus, further disparity is marked between advantaged and disadvantaged children.

Wright (2015, p.342-3) draws on Bourdieu's work in her argument that nowhere does inequality impact more than in the case of music education. She argues that many students 'actively position themselves as ... lacking the cultural capital required' to take part. If arts education is to engage children and increase their reserves of cultural capital, it also needs to involve children's family and social circles. Martin et al (2013) employ ecological systems theory to highlight this need for context that is wider than school. They argue that school, home and community all need to be taken into account as major influences on a child's development. Crossick and Kaszynska (2016, p.117) also reference this article, concluding that:

If we are to speak of valid inferences and reliable effects with respect to the wider benefits of arts learning, we need a better understanding of the processes involved, as well as the contextual elements that might contribute to positive outcomes.

The European Opera Centre's project aimed to engage parents and carers by inviting them in to take part in workshops during the week of the project as well as attending the final performance at the end of the week. All involved found this to be a positive addition to the project, although there was a risk of some children feeling left out if their parents or carers did not engage for whatever reason. There was a lot of feedback to suggest that children were communicating their enjoyment of the project to their families and this is in line with Safford and O'Sullivan's (2007) findings on creative partnerships. They found that such enthusiastic communication was much greater when it came to describing short-term and long-term creative projects as opposed to children reporting back on work in the core literacy and numeracy curriculum. When creative projects were sustained, Safford and Sullivan (2007) found that these discussions between children and their families influenced parents and carers in a number of ways. Some parents felt a greater understanding of their

children's school life and 'what constitutes learning in and out of school'. Others became more critical of the core curriculum and saw a need for creative projects to influence their children's learning and aspirations. If, as planned, the European Opera Centre manages to extend the project at Barlows by securing a visit to a professional opera rehearsal for the children (and ideally their families too), this could be an excellent addition to the project. It might enable this channel between children and parents to remain open as well as providing a rich cultural experience for all involved.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The project involved the removal of hierarchies. Children, educational professionals and arts professionals worked together in a collaboration that bore fruit.
- The European Opera Centre demonstrated that it has the experience and skills required for collaborative learning projects such as this one. It was able to effectively draw upon established links and create new ones.
- The animated opera, *The Cunning Little Vixen*, provided an excellent grounding in opera for children and adults alike. Although it was not designed as a teaching tool, it has the potential to work very well in this regard. Clever storytelling and humour appeared integral to its success.
- The project was a highly inclusive one. It provided meaningful roles for all the children involved and celebrated each of these roles at the end of the week.
- Involving parents and carers in the project worked well. The project opened up channels of communication between children and parents and inviting parents and carers to workshops offered an opportunity to further inform them about the creative project. Extending this involvement through inviting families to a professional opera rehearsal and 'behind-the-scenes' tour would be commendable.

Rolling out the project to other schools

- The child-led approach to the European Opera Centre's project was highly successful at Barlows but it did mean the school forfeiting some control over the outcomes of the process. Schools that take part in the project in future should be aware of this from the start and need to be committed to the process.
- The structure of the project was sound and any changes to it would involve compromise. The two days of workshops led to a rich experience for children but it did mean that at times the rest of the week felt rushed. Reducing the workshops to one day would enable more focus on the final performance, but it would reduce the breadth of children's experiences. It is likely that either approach could work if the school and facilitators are aware of potential pitfalls.
- The project could potentially work with fewer facilitators providing there was someone overseeing the project. The Director is best situated in the Drama group rather than Production.
- If facilitators were DBS checked there would be less pressure on schools' resources.
- If some children were given a role in 'Media', there would be greater scope to record the process and performance as well as including another area of skill development and experience.
- There should be an acknowledgement from stakeholders that the outcomes from the project at Barlows will not necessarily be replicated in other settings. The particular resources of the school (including available rooms and staff) might not be able to be matched elsewhere. The school's commitment to the project and its flexibility were crucial.
- Stakeholders in the project should be open to the range of possible outcomes of the project. There is validity in the children engaging with the project and enjoying it as well as it improving areas of learning and developing transferable skills and qualities.

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January 2018

ISBN: 978-1-900230-60-5